Stories of New Muslims

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Conveying Islamic Message Society

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Introduction

Conveying Islamic Message Society is dedicated to the cause of Islam worldwide through striving to elevate the image of Islam and Muslims by providing the information about Islamic beliefs, history and civilizations from the authentic sources. The aim of this book is to give the non-Muslim individuals a genuine opportunity to share the New Muslims their experiences when they genuinely had an access to authentic Islam. As Allah says in the Holy Quran:

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full Knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things).

Conveying Islamic Message society (CIMS) is an Egyptian non-profit charity society was launched in 1974 with a registered Charity No. 536 in the Ministry of Social Affairs. Our society propagates and conveys the message of Islam adapting the guidance revealed in the Holy Quran and the model of Allah's messenger Muhammad (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), his companions and the true followers of the devoted Muslims.

Should you have any questions about Islam and Muslims, all enquiries are welcomed. Please do not hesitate to write to the above mentioned address or e-mail us on islam_post@hotmail.com

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Sisters

1. Ms. Afrah Alshaibani

May 2, 1996. Ever since I can remember, my family attended a non-denominational conservative Christian church (Church of Christ). I grew up in the church, taught bible school and sang in the choir. As a young teenager I began asking questions (as I think everyone does at one point in their lives): Why was I a member of the Church of Christ and not say Lutheran, Catholic or Methodist? If various churches are teaching conflicting doctrine, how do we know which one is right? Are they all right? Do `all paths lead to God' as I had heard some say? Others say that as long as you are a good person it doesn't matter what you believe - is that true?

After some soul searching I decided that I did believe that there was an ultimate truth and in an attempt to find that truth I began a comparison study of various churches. I decided that I believed in the Bible and would join the church that best followed the Bible. After a lengthy study, I decided to stay with the Church of Christ, satisfied that its doctrines were biblically sound (unaware at this stage that there could be various interpretations of the Bible).

I spent a year at Michigan Christian College; a small college affiliated with the Churches of Christ, but was not challenged academically and so transferred to Western Michigan University. Having applied late for student housing, I was placed in the international dorm. Although my roommate was American, I felt surrounded by strange people from strange places. It was in fact my first real experience with cultural diversity and it scared me (having been raised in a white, middle class, Christian community). I wanted to change dorms but there wasn't anything available. I did really like my roommate and decided to stick out the semester.

My roommate became very involved in the dorm activities and got to know most everyone in the dorm. I however performed with

the marching band and spent most of my time with band people. Marching season soon ended and finding myself with time on my hands, I joined my roommate on her adventures around the dorm. It turned out to be a wonderful, fascinating experience! There were a large number of Arab men living in the dorm. They were charming, handsome, and a lot of fun to be around. My roommate started dating one of them and we ended up spending most of our time with the Arabs. I guess I knew they were Muslims (although very few of them were practising). We never really discussed religion, we were just having fun.

The year passed and I had started seeing one of the Arabs. Again, we were just enjoying each other's company and never discussed our religious differences. Neither of us were practicing at this time so it never really became an issue for us. I did, deep down, feel guilty for not attending church, but I pushed it in the back of my mind. I was having too much fun. Another year passed and I was home for summer vacation when my roommate called me with some very distressing news: she'd become a Muslim!! I was horrified. She didn't tell me why she converted, just that she had spent a lot of time talking with her boyfriend's brother and it all made sense to her. After we hung up, I immediately wrote her a long letter explaining that she was ruining her life and to just give Christianity one more chance. That same summer my boyfriend transferred to Azusa Pacific University in California. We decided to get married and move to California together. Again, since neither one were practising, religion was not discussed.

Secretly I started reading books on Islam. However I read books that were written by non-Muslims. One of the books I read was Islam Revealed by Anis Sorosh. I felt guilty about my friend's conversion. I felt that if I had been a better Christian, she would have turned to the church rather than Islam. Islam was a man-made religion, I believed, and filled with contradictions. After reading Sorosh's book, I thought I could convert my friend and my husband to Christianity.

At APU, my husband was required to take a few religion courses. One day he came home from class and said: "The more I learn about Christianity, the stronger my belief in Islam becomes." At about this same time he started showing signs of wanting to practice his religion again. Our problems began. We started talking about religion and arguing about our different beliefs. He told me I should learn about Islam and I told him I already knew everything I needed to know. I got out Sorosh's book and told him I could never believe in Islam. My husband is not a scholar by any stretch of the imagination, yet he had an answer for everything I showed him in Sorosh's book. I was impressed by his knowledge. He told me that if I really wanted to learn about Islam it must be through Islamic sources. He bought a few books for me from an Islamic bookstore and I started taking classes at a local mosque. What a difference the Islam I learned about from Muslim sources from the Islam I learned about from non-Muslims!

It was so difficult though when I actually decided to convert. My pride stood in the way for a while. How could I admit to my husband and my friend that they were right all along? I felt humiliated, embarrassed. Soon though, I could deny the truth no longer, swallowed my pride, and *alhamdulilah*, embraced Islam - the best decision I ever made.

A few things I want to say to the non-Muslim reader:

1. When I originally began my search for the truth all those years ago, I made a few wrong assumptions. First, I assumed that the truth is with Christianity only. It never occurred to me at that time to look outside Christianity. Second, I assumed that the Bible was the true Word of God. These were bad assumptions because they prohibited me from looking at things objectively. When I began my earnest study of Islam, I had to start at the very beginning, with no preconceived ideas. I was not a Christian looking at Islam; I looked at both Islam and Christianity (and

many other religions) from the point of view of an outsider. My advice to you is to be a critical thinker and a critical reader.

2. Another mistake that many people make when talking about Islam is that they pick out a certain teaching and judge the whole of Islam on that one point. For example, many people say that Islam is prejudiced towards women because Islamic laws of inheritance award the male twice as much as the female. What they fail to learn, however, is that males have financial responsibilities in Islam that females do not have. It is like putting a puzzle together: until you have all the pieces in the right places, you cannot make a statement about the picture, you cannot look at one little piece of the puzzle and judge the whole picture. 3.Many people said that the only reason I converted was because of my husband. It is true that I studied Islam because he asked me to - but I accepted Islam because it is the truth. My husband and I are currently separated and plan to divorce in June, *insha'Allah*. My faith in Islam has never been stronger than it is now. I look forward to finding a practicing Muslim husband, *insha'Allah*, and growing in my faith and practice. Being a good Muslim is my number one priority. May Allah lead all of us closer to the truth.

2. C. Huda Dodge "My Path to Islam"

Salaam alaykum wa rahmatullah.

Since I have started reading and posting on this newsgroup a few months ago, I have noticed a great interest in converts (reverts) to Islam: how are people introduced to it, what attracts people to this faith, how their life changes when they embrace Islam, etc. I have received a lot of e-mail from people asking me these questions. In this post, I hope *insha'Allah* to address how, when and why an American like myself came to embrace Islam. It's long, and I'm sorry for that, but I don't think you can fully understand this process from a few paragraphs. I tried not to ramble on or get off on tangents. At

times the story is detailed, because I think it helps to truly understand how my path to Islam developed. Of course, there's a lot I left out (I'm not trying to tell you my whole life story - just the pertinent stuff).

It's interesting for me to look back on my life and see how it all fits together - how Allah planned this for me all along. When I think about it, I can't help saying `*Subhannallah*,' and thank Allah for bringing me to where I am today. At other times, I feel sad that I was not born into Islam and [thereby] been a Muslim all my life. While I admire those who were, I at times pity them because sometimes they don't really appreciate this blessing. *Insha'Allah*, reading this can help you understand how I, at least, came to be a Muslim. Whether it gives you ideas for *da'wah*, or just gives you some inspiration in your own faith, I hope it is worth your time to read it, *insha'Allah*. It is my story, but I think a lot of others might see themselves in it.

I was born in San Francisco, California, and raised in a Bay Area suburb. My small town (San Anselmo, pop. about 14,000 last I checked) was a mostly white, upper-middle-class, Christian community. It is a beautiful area - just north of San Francisco (across the Golden Gate Bridge), nestled in a valley near the hillsides (Mount Tamalpais) and the Pacific Ocean. I knew all of my neighbors, played baseball in the street, caught frogs in the creeks, rode horses in the hills, and climbed trees in my front yard. My father is Presbyterian, and my mother is Catholic. My father was never really active in any church, but my mother tried to raise us as Catholics. She took us to church sometimes, but we didn't know what was going on. People stand up, sit down, kneel, sit again, stand up, and recite things after the priest. Each pew had a booklet - a kind of `direction book' -and we had to follow along in order to know what to do next (if we didn't fall asleep first). I was baptized in this church, and received my First Communion at about the age of 8 (I have pictures, but I don't remember it much). After that, we only went about once a year.

I lived on a dead-end street of about 15 houses. My grammar school was at the end of the street (4 houses down), next to a small Presbyterian church. When I was about 10, the people of this church invited me to participate in their children's Christmas play. Every Sunday morning from then on, I walked down to church alone (no one else in my family was interested in coming). The whole congregation was only about 30 older people (past their 50's), but they were nice and never made me feel out of place. There were about 3 younger couples with children younger than me. I became a very active member of this church down the street. When I was in 6th grade, I started babysitting the younger kids during the service. By 9th grade, I was helping the minister's wife teach Sunday school. In high school, I started a church youth group by recruiting 4 of my friends to join me. It was a small group: me, my friends, and a young couple with kids, but we liked it that way. The big Presbyterian Church in town had about 100 kids in their youth group and took trips to Mexico, etc. But our group was content to get together to study the bible, talk about God, and raise money for charities.

These friends and I would sit together and talk about spiritual issues. We debated about questions in our minds: what happens to the people who lived before Jesus came (go to heaven or hell); why do some very righteous people automatically go to hell just because they don't believe in Jesus (we thought about Gandhi); on the other hand, why do some pretty horrible people (like my friend's abusive father) get rewarded with heaven just because they're Christian; why does a loving and merciful God require a blood sacrifice (Jesus) to forgive people's sins; why are we guilty of Adam's original sin; why does the Word of God (Bible) disagree with scientific facts; how can Jesus be God; how can One God be 3 different things; etc. We debated about these things, but never came up with good answers. The church couldn't give us good answers either; they only told us to "have faith."

The people at church told me about a Presbyterian summer camp in Northern California. I went for the first time when I was 10.

For the next 7 years, I went every summer. While I was happy with the little church I went to, this is where I really felt in touch with God, without confusion. It was here that I developed my very deep faith in God. We spent much of our time outdoors, playing games, doing crafts, swimming, etc. It was fun, but every day we would also take time out to pray, study the bible, sing spiritual songs, and have `quiet time.' It is this quiet time that really meant a lot to me, and of which I have the best memories. The rule was that you had to sit alone - anywhere on the camp's 200 beautiful acres. I would often go to a meadow, or sit on a bridge overlooking the creek, and just THINK. I looked around me, at the creek, the trees, the clouds, the bugs :) - listened to the water, the birds' songs, the crickets' chirps. This place really let me feel at peace, and I admired and thanked God for His beautiful creation. At the end of each summer, when I returned back home, this feeling stayed with me. I loved to spend time outdoors, alone, to just think about God, life, and my place in it. I developed my personal understanding of Jesus' role as a teacher and example, and left all the confusing church teachings behind.

I believed (and still do) in the teaching "Love your neighbor as yourself," fully giving to others without expecting anything in return, treating others as you would like to be treated. I strived to help everyone I could. When I was fourteen, I got my first job, at an ice cream store. When I got my paycheck each month (it wasn't much), I sent the first $25 to a program called `Foster Parents Plan' (they've changed the name now). This was a charity that hooked up needy children overseas with American sponsors. During my 4 years of high school, I was a sponsor for a young Egyptian boy named Sherif. I sent him part of my paycheck each month, and we exchanged letters. (His letters were in Arabic, and looking at them now, it appears that he believed he was writing to an adult man, not a girl 5 years older than him.) He was 9 years old, his father was dead, and his mother was ill and couldn't work. He had 2 younger brothers and a sister my age. I remember getting a letter from him when I was 16 - he was excited because his sister had gotten engaged. I thought,

"She's the same age as me, and she's getting engaged!!!" It seemed so foreign to me. These were the first Muslims I had contact with.

Aside from this, I was also involved with other activities in high school. I tutored Central American students at my school in English. In a group called "Students for Social Responsibility," I helped charities for Nicaraguan school children and Kenyan villagers. We campaigned against nuclear arms (the biggest fear we all had at that time was of a nuclear war). I invited exchange students from France into my home, and I had pen pals from all over the world (France, Germany, Sweden, etc.). My junior year of high school, we hosted a group called 'Children of War' - a group of young people from South Africa, Gaza Strip, Guatemala, and other war-torn lands, who toured the country telling their stories and their wishes for peace. Two of them stayed at my house - the group's chaperone from Nicaragua, and a young black South African man. The summer after my junior year of high school, I took a volunteer job in San Francisco (the Tenderloin district), teaching English to refugee women. In my class were Fatimah and Maysoon, 2 Chinese Muslim widows from Vietnam. These were the next Muslims I met, although we couldn't talk much (their English was too minimal). All they did was laugh.

All of these experiences put me in touch with the outside world, and led me to value people of all kinds. Throughout my youth and high school, I had developed two very deep interests: faith in God, and interacting with people from other countries. When I left home to attend college in Portland, Oregon, I brought these interests with me. At Lewis & Clark College, I started out as a Foreign Language (French & Spanish) major, with a thought to one day work with refugee populations, or teach English as a Second Language. When I arrived at school, I moved into a dorm room with two others - a girl from California (who grew up only 10 minutes from where I did), and a 29-year-old Japanese woman (exchange student). I was 17. I didn't know anyone else at school, so I tried to get involved in activities to meet people. In line with my interests, I chose to get involved with 2 groups: Campus Crusade for Christ (obviously, a

Christian group), and Conversation Groups (where they match Americans up with a group of international students to practice English).

I met with the Campus Crusade students during my first term of school. A few of the people that I met were very nice, pure-hearted people, but the majority were very ostentatious. We got together every week to listen to "personal testimonies," sing songs, etc. Every week we visited a different church in the Portland area. Most of the churches were unlike anything I'd ever been exposed to before. One final visit to a church in the Southeast area freaked me out so much that I quit going to the Crusade meetings. At this church, there was a rock band with electric guitars, and people were waving their hands in the air (above their heads, with their eyes closed) and singing "hallelujah." I had never seen anything like it! I see things like this now on TV, but coming from a very small Presbyterian church, I was disturbed. Others in Campus Crusade loved this church, and they continued to go. The atmosphere seemed so far removed from the worship of God, and I didn't feel comfortable returning.

I always felt closest to God when I was in a quiet setting and/or outdoors. I started taking walks around campus (Lewis & Clark College has a beautiful campus!), sitting on benches, looking at the view of Mount Hood, watching the trees change colors. One day I wandered into the campus chapel - a small, round building nestled in the trees. It was beautifully simple. The pews formed a circle around the center of the room, and a huge pipe organ hung from the ceiling in the middle. No altar, no crosses, no statues - nothing. Just some simple wood benches and a pipe organ. During the rest of the year, I spent a lot of time in this building, listening to the organist practice, or just sitting alone in the quiet to think. I felt more comfortable and close to God there than at any church I had ever been to.

During this time, I was also meeting with a group of international students as part of the Conversation Group program. We had 5 people in our group: me, a Japanese man and woman, an

Italian man and a Palestinian man. We met twice a week over lunch, to practice English conversation skills. We talked about our families, our studies, our childhoods, cultural differences, etc. As I listened to the Palestinian man (Faris) talk about his life, his family, his faith, etc., it struck a nerve in me. I remembered Sherif, Fatima and Maysoon, the only other Muslims I had ever known. Previously, I had seen their beliefs and way of life as foreign, something that was alien to my culture. I never bothered to learn about their faith because of this cultural barrier. But the more I learned about Islam, the more I became interested in it as a possibility for my own life.

During my second term of school, the conversation group disbanded and the international students transferred to other schools. The discussions we had, however, stayed at the front of my thoughts. The following term, I registered for a class in the religious studies department: Introduction to Islam. This class brought back all of the concerns that I had about Christianity. As I learned about Islam, all of my questions were answered. All of us are not punished for Adam's original sin. Adam asked God for forgiveness and our Merciful and Loving God forgave him. God doesn't require a blood sacrifice in payment for sin. We must sincerely ask for forgiveness and amend our ways. Jesus wasn't God, he was a prophet, like all of the other prophets, who all taught the same message: Believe in the One true God; worship and submit to Him alone; and live a righteous life according to the guidance He has sent. This answered all of my questions about the trinity and the nature of Jesus (all God, all human, or a combination). God is a Perfect and Fair Judge, who will reward or punish us based on our faith and righteousness. I found a teaching that put everything in its proper perspective, and appealed to my heart and my intellect. It seemed natural. It wasn't confusing. I had been searching, and I had found a place to rest my faith.

That summer, I returned home to the Bay Area and continued my studies of Islam. I checked books out of the library and talked with my friends. They were as deeply spiritual as I was, and had also

been searching (most of them were looking into eastern religions, Buddhism in particular). They understood my search, and were happy I could find something to believe in. They raised questions, though, about how Islam would affect my life: as a woman, as a liberal Californian :), with my family, etc. I continued to study, pray and soul-search to see how comfortable I really was with it. I sought out Islamic centers in my area, but the closest one was in San Francisco, and I never got there to visit (no car, and bus schedules didn't fit with my work schedule). So I continued to search on my own. When it came up in conversation, I talked to my family about it. I remember one time in particular, when we were all watching a public television program about the Eskimos. They said that the Eskimos have over 200 words for `snow,' because snow is such a big part of their life. Later that night, we were talking about how different languages have many words for things that are important to them. My father commented about all the different words Americans use for `money' (money, dough, bread, etc.). I commented, "You know, the Muslims have 99 names for God - I guess that's what is important to them."

At the end of the summer, I returned to Lewis & Clark. The first thing I did was contact the mosque in southwest Portland. I asked for the name of a woman I could talk to, and they gave me the number of a Muslim American sister. That week, I visited her at home. After talking for a while, she realized that I was already a believer. I told her I was just looking for some women who could help guide me in the practicalities of what it meant to be a Muslim. For example, how to pray. I had read it in books, but I couldn't figure out how to do it just from books. I made attempts, and prayed in English, but I knew I wasn't doing it right. The sister invited me that night to an *aqiqa* (dinner after the birth of a new baby). She picked me up that night and we went. I felt so comfortable with the Muslim sisters there, and they were very friendly to me that night. I said my *shahaada*, witnessed by a few sisters. They taught me how to pray. They talked to me about their own faith (many of them were

also American). I left that night feeling like I had just started a new life.

I was still living in a campus dorm, and was pretty isolated from the Muslim community. I had to take 2 buses to get to the area where the mosque was (and where most of the women lived). I quickly lost touch with the women I met, and was left to pursue my faith on my own at school. I made a few attempts to go to the mosque, but was confused by the meeting times. Sometimes I'd show up to borrow some books from the library, and the whole building would be full of men. Another time I decided to go to my first *Jumah* prayer, and I couldn't go in for the same reason. Later, I was told that women only meet at a certain time (Saturday afternoon), and that I couldn't go at other times. I was discouraged and confused, but I continued to have faith and learn on my own.

Six months after my *shahaada*, I observed my first Ramadan. I had been contemplating the issue of *Hijab*, but was too scared to take that step before. I had already begun to dress more modestly, and usually wore a scarf over my shoulders (when I visited the sister, she told me "all you have to do is move that scarf from your shoulders to your head, and you'll be Islamically dressed."). At first I didn't feel ready to wear *Hijab*, because I didn't feel strong enough in my faith. I understood the reason for it, agreed with it, and admired the women who did wear it. They looked so pious and noble. But I knew that if I wore it, people would ask me a lot of questions, and I didn't feel ready or strong enough to deal with that. This changed as Ramadan approached, and on the first day of Ramadan, I woke up and went to class in *Hijab*. *Alhamdillah*, I haven't taken it off since. Something about Ramadan helped me to feel strong, and proud to be a Muslim. I felt ready to answer anybody's questions.

However, I also felt isolated and lonely during that first Ramadan. No one from the Muslim community even called me. I was on a meal plan at school, so I had to arrange to get special meals

(the dining hall wasn't open during the hours I could eat). The school agreed to give me my meals in bag lunches. So every night as sundown approached, I'd walk across the street to the kitchen, go in the back to the huge refrigerators, and take my 2 bag lunches (one for *fitoor*, one for *suhoor*). I'd bring the bags back to my dorm room and eat alone. They always had the same thing: yoghurt, a piece of fruit, cookies, and either a tuna or egg salad sandwich. The same thing, for both meals, for the whole month. I was lonely, but at the same time I had never felt more at peace with myself.

When I embraced Islam, I told my family. They were not surprised. They kind of saw it coming, from my actions and what I said when I was home that summer. They accepted my decision, and knew that I was sincere. Even before, my family always accepted my activities and my deep faith, even if they didn't share it. They were not as open-minded, however, when I started to wear *Hijab*. They worried that I was cutting myself off from society that I would be discriminated against, that it would discourage me from reaching my goals, and they were embarrassed to be seen with me. They thought it was too radical. They didn't mind if I had a different faith, but they didn't like it to affect my life in an outward way. They were more upset when I decided to get married. During this time, I had gotten back in touch with Faris, the Muslim Palestinian brother of my conversation group, the one who first prompted my interest in Islam. He was still in the Portland area, attending the community college. We started meeting again, over lunch, in the library, at his brother's house, etc. We were married the following summer (after my sophomore year, a year after my *shahaada*). My family freaked out. They weren't quite yet over my *Hijab*, and they felt like I had thrown something else at them. They argued that I was too young, and worried that I would abandon my goals, drop out of school, become a young mother, and destroy my life. They liked my husband, but didn't trust him at first (they were thinking `green card scam'). My family and I fought over this for several months, and I feared that our relationship would never be repaired.

That was 3 years ago, and a lot has changed. Faris and I moved to Corvallis, Oregon, home of Oregon State University. We live in a very strong and close-knit Muslim community. I graduated magna cum laude last year, with a degree in child development. I have had several jobs, from secretary to preschool teacher, with no problems about my *Hijab*. I'm active in the community, and still do volunteer work. My husband, *insha'Allah*, will finish his Electrical Engineering degree this year. We visit my family a couple of times a year. I met Faris' parents for the first time this summer, and we get along great. I'm slowly but surely adding Arabic to the list of languages I speak. My family has seen all of this, and has recognized that I didn't destroy my life. They see that Islam has brought me happiness, not pain and sorrow. They are proud of my accomplishments, and can see that I am truly happy and at peace. Our relationship is back to normal, and they are looking forward to our visit next month, *insha'Allah*.

Looking back on all of this, I feel truly grateful that Allah has guided me to where I am today. I truly feel blessed. It seems that all of the pieces of my life fit together in a pattern - a path to Islam.

Alhamdillillahi rabi al'amin.

Your sister in faith,
C. Huda Dodge

".Say: Allah's guidance is the only guidance, and we have been directed to submit ourselves to the Lord of the Worlds.." Qur'an (6:71)

3. Celine

Salam Alekhum.

I became Muslim almost three years ago, right after Ramadan in between the two *Eids*. My spiritual search lasted over thirty years. I was born a Catholic and found many things I did not agree with: I

believe in Jesus, but did not believe that he was the son of God, nor that he was God. I concluded on my own that he was a rabbi, since he was a learned Jew and a teacher. Because of this I went and studied under rabbis and learnt the Tanakh, the Torah and some of the laws of Judaism. I learnt the Kosher laws and the proper way of cooking, and the rules of being a woman. It became natural that men and women prayed separated as the women were together.

Though Judaism was not the answer for me, I gained an understanding of its religious and spiritual ways. I then looked into women spirituality but found that it was lacking something, it was not always monotheistic in practice because they believe in a Goddess, and disclaimed many teachings by re-inventing a new way of life. I had a great deal of problems with God being a woman since I did not believe He was a man either. I liked the Judaic way that God was unseen and unknown. Because of this I could not understand their teachings but I did agree in the equality of men and of women. Because of this I respect their search but their methods did not appeal to me. In 1990, I learnt about native spirituality. Though they believe in the Creator and the oneness of the world I could not become native - I had to find my own spirituality. I was shocked when my country Canada went to war against Mohawks in 1990. I fought side by side with them for about five years. I was working but at that time I was offered a choice, I saw two paths in front of me: one the path of God, the other the path of man. I made a conscious commitment towards God, that I would serve Him and use my talents to propagate His word and His message, that is, one of Peace and of Justice through his laws. I chose the path of God instead of that of "man" - in this case human. When the crisis was finished after five years, God guided me back to my spiritual roots.

Most of my life I had friends that came from North Africa and the Middle East. They were Jewish, Christian and Muslim, but whether they observed their religion or did not, it mattered little to me, as I did not believe in organized religion. I have strongly believed all my life that I should talk directly to God and ask what I needed and thank Him for what He gave me. I also strongly believe in the

equality of men and women, and the equality of all races in front of God and of people. Christianity taught me about Jesus, whom I believed in. Judaism showed me I could talk to God directly, that men and women should worship separately, and that God had dietary laws. Mohawks showed me that men and women were equal though they had different obligations. Where could I find all of this. No religion, no teachings could offer me all of this, but God was there to guide me.

When I was twenty-five years old, I met and fell in love with a young man. He was Iraqi by birth, Jewish by religion, and lived in Israel for many years. He came to Canada in the 1970's, and we met and fell in love. Then there was a war in between Israel and Lebanon. We were to get married and he decided to go back and fight in the army. Sadly, he was killed. For many years I kept the hurt bottled up inside of me. But Allah protected my heart and gave me a great gift. I met a Lebanese Muslim girl. She was not very religious but she was proud to be Muslim. We talked and I told her what happened, she looked at me with tears in her eyes and told me she lost her brother during that same war. To this day we do not know if her brother killed my boyfriend or vice versa, maybe they did not kill one another that too is a possibility. What came out of this, after the tears and the hurt is that we became very good friends, and she helped me heal my aching heart. I also saw the horrors of war and it's evilness, how people get hurt.

In 1995 there was a controversy in Montreal about women wearing *Hijab*, so I decided to document this myself, and look for interviews since I had a spot on the radio for about 4 years, doing Native, North African and Middle Eastern news. I met through a friend this very kind woman, she is Iraqi - Allah does work in unusual ways - who spoke about the importance of wearing *Hijab* and what it meant to her. What struck me with her was her deep commitment towards God whom she called Allah. I was impressed by her truthfulness and her kindness of heart. She explained to me what was Islam. She told me that "There is no other GOD but

GOD". Men and women were equal, that all races were equal in front of GOD, that Jesus was a Prophet not a rabbi, that Maryam his mother was a great example, and that the dietary laws were less strict than in Judaism. To my astonishment this is what I believe in. I started being friends with her and within one month I became Muslim like her. I recited my *Shahada* with her.

This was three years ago. I now wear *Hijab* and I am very happy. I have gone back to University and am studying religions. My field is Islam, and I would like to go as far as my doctorate and become proficient in law for women, and Hadith. I am presently writing a book about women and Islam in the 7th century in English. I now have a radio show which I co-produce with my friend through whom I became Muslim. It lasts half an hour. We talk to women from around the world and from various religious denominations. I try with the help of teachers and religious leaders to de-mystify Islam and the message of Islam. I am also trying to document in film the life of Muslim women and their role in society. Allah guided me and gave me what I was looking for through Islam. Because of this I try to use my pen and the airwaves to give a broad picture of all the facets of Islam and see the unity in the diversity that is Islam. My Muslim name is *Um-Khalthum*, like the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. She has inspired me to be a good Muslim as she too was a convert or revert to Islam.

This is my story. My first love was for an Iraqi Jewish young man, who died stupidly in a war, my heart was broken. I was left in pieces in Lebanon, yet a Lebanese Muslim woman started the mending process. But my heart was healed by another Iraqi, this time a Muslim woman, because she introduced me to Islam and invited to become Muslim. From the pain of loss the joy of finding a way of life that brings me closer to Allah.

May Allah guide all of those who have a broken heart. And remember that the message of Islam is that of peace and of harmony. Before we heal we must talk about the hurt, and Allah does heal our

hearts by putting people in our path that are there to guide us to HIM.

Ma Salam
Um-Khalthum (Celine)

4. Ms. Helena

Growing up in a supposedly Christian, but in fact non-religious family, I never heard the name of God being uttered, I never saw anyone pray and I learned early on that the only reason for doing things was to benefit yourself. We celebrated Christmas, Easter, Mid-summer and All Saints Day and even though I never knew why, I never questioned it. It was part of being Swedish. As a Christian (protestant) you can go through something called confirmation when you are about 15 years of age. This is meant to be a class to take to learn about your religion and then confirm your belief. I wanted to do this to learn about Christianity so I was signed up for this 3-week camp which was a combined golf-and confirmation camp. In the mornings we had classes with a senile priest and our thoughts wandered off to the upcoming game of golf. I didn't learn anything.

I went through high-school with a breeze. I felt that nothing could harm me. My grades were the best possible and my self confidence was at the top. Religion never came to my mind. I was doing just fine. Everyone I knew that was "religious" had found "the light" after being either depressed or very sick and they said that they needed Jesus in their life to be able to live on. I felt that I could do anything that I put my mind to and that religion only was an excuse to hide from reality.

In college, I started thinking about the meaning of life. I had a hard time accepting any religion because of all the wars and problems relating to them. I made up my own philosophy. I was convinced that some form of power created everything but I couldn't say that it was God. God for me was the Christian image of an old man with a long white beard and I knew that an old man could not have created

the universe! I believed in a life after death because I just couldn't believe that justice wouldn't be served. I also believed that everything happens for a reason. Due to my background and schooling I was fooled to believe in Darwin's theory, since it is taught as a fact. The more I thought about the meaning of life, the more depressed I became, and I felt that this life is like a prison. I lost most of my appetite for life.

I knew a lot about Buddhism and Hinduism since I was interested in these things in school. We learned in detail about their way of thinking and worship. I didn't know anything about Islam. I remember my high-school textbook in Religion showing how Muslims pray. It was like a cartoon strip to show the movements but I didn't learn about the belief. I was fed all the propaganda through mass media and I was convinced that all Muslim men oppressed their wives and hit their children. They were all violent and didn't hesitate to kill.

In my last year of college I had a big passion for science and I was ready to hit the working scene. An international career or at least some international experience was needed to improve my English and get an advantage over fellow job hunters. I ended up in Boston and was faced with four Muslims. At that point I didn't know who Muhammad was and I didn't know that Allah was the same god as "God". I started asking questions and reading books, but most importantly, I started socializing with Muslims. I never had any friends from another country before (let alone another religion). All the people that I knew were Swedish. The Muslims that I met were wonderful people. They accepted me right away and they never forced anything on me. They were more generous to me than my own family. Islam seemed to be a good system of life and I acknowledged the structure and stability it provided but I was not convinced it was for me. One of my problems was that science contradicted religion (at least from what I knew about Christianity). I read the book "The Bible, The Quran and Science" by Maurice Bucaille and all of my scientific questions were answered! Here was a

religion that was in line with modern science. I felt excited but it was still not in my heart.

I had a period of brain storming when I was thinking over all the new things I learnt. I felt my heart softening and I tried to imagine a life as a Muslim. I saw a humble life full of honesty, generosity, stability, peace, respect and kindness. Most of all I saw a life with a MEANING. I knew I had to let go of my ego and humble myself before something much more powerful than myself.

Twice, I was asked the question "What is stopping you from becoming Muslim?" The first time I panicked and my brain was blocked. The second time I thought for awhile to come up with any excuse. There was none so I said the *shahada*, *Al-Hamdulillah*.

Love,
Helena

5. Ms. Jewellee

I am a new Muslim. I am writing to tell you 'why' I converted to Islam, but it's going to be more like 'how.'

Last year, at the age of 23, I was trying to open an import/export company to sell children's books overseas. Much thought went into my decision to work with Saudi Arabia above any other country. After contacting the Saudi Arabia Commercial Office at the Royal Embassy in Washington DC, I learned that all contracts with my sponsor must be in Arabic to be binding. That prompted me to study Arabic so I would know what I was signing. I went to a local language school where I took classes with a private tutor named Suad. She was one of the nicest people I ever met as well as one of the most religious. All the books, tapes, and videos that I studied from centered on Islam (Ifta Ya Sim Sim, etc.), so without realizing it I was learning about Islam all along! I was not brought up with any

religious indoctrination. I knew the basics, but I had never gone to church.

The same time this was going on, I was having the hardest time in my life. I was on the east coast and my family was on the west coast, the friends I had were not acting like the 'quality' kind of people I knew I needed to hang around with, and I had really difficult money problems (who doesn't). I was crying almost every day. I never felt more alone in my life. It was affecting my job and my Arabic classes. Suad noticed, and she was always there to listen. She gave the best advice (Islamic), and she was always right. She told me that if I just submitted myself to God completely, he would take away all the pain and loneliness I was feeling. That was on a Thursday. That night, I asked God to help me, when I woke up the next day I felt completely relieved of all my pain. I could say "God will take care of it" out loud and mean it. I spent that weekend talking to Suad about Islam and I learned that I knew more about Islam than I thought! On Sunday I did my *Shahada* at an Islamic Women's Group meeting. The next Friday, January 20, 1995, after the noon prayer, I did my open *Shahada* at the *Masjid Dal Hijrah* in Falls Church, Virginia. *Ramadhan* started shortly after that, and I went to Mecca for *Umrah* at the end of *Ramadhan* (last 10 days). It has been the best thing I ever did in my life and I never looked back.

My experiences with Islam have shown me that if you follow God's direction (awkward to call it law because it's much more than that) you will have everything you need and often what you want, enshallah. Faith in Allah is the best advantage anyone could ever give themselves!

6. Ms. Kaci Starbuck

My first realization about the Christian idea of salvation came after I was baptized into a Southern Baptist church at a young age. I was taught in Sunday School that "if you aren't baptized, then you are going to hell". My own baptism had taken place because I

wanted to please people. My mom had come into my room one evening and I asked her about baptism. She encouraged me to do it. So, the next Sunday, I decided to go to the front of the church. During a hymn at the end of the sermon, I walked forward to meet with the youth minister. He had a smile on his face, greeted me, then sat beside me on a pew. He asked a question, "Why do you want to do this?"... I paused, then said, "because I love Jesus and I know that he loves me". After making the statement, the members of the church came up and hugged me... anticipating the ceremonial immersion in water just a few weeks later.

During my early years at church, even in the kindergarten class, I remember being a vocal participant in the Sunday School lessons. Later, in my early adolescent years I was a member of the young girls' group that gathered at the church for weekly activities and went on annual retreats to a camp. During my youth, I attended a camp with older members of the youth group. Though I hadn't spent much time with them before, they recognized me as "the daughter of a youth coordinator" or "the girl who plays piano at special occasions at church". One evening at this camp a man was speaking about his marriage. He told the story about meeting his wife. He had grown up in the US where dating was normal, but in the girl's culture, he could only be with her if they had a guardian with them. Since he liked her, he decided to continue seeing her. Another stipulation is that they could not touch each other until she had been given a promise ring. Once he proposed to her, they were allowed to hold hands. -This baffled me, yet held me in awe. It was beautiful to think that such discovery of another person could be saved until a commitment was made. Though I enjoyed the story, I never thought that the same incident could occur again.

A few years later, my parents divorced and the role of religion changed in my life. I had always seen my family through the eyes of a child - they were perfect. My dad was a deacon in the church, well respected, and known by all. My mom was active with youth groups. When my mom left, I took the role of caretaker of my father and two

brothers. We continued to go to church, but when visiting my mom on weekends, the visits to churches became more infrequent. When at my dad's home we would gather at night every night to read Corinthians 1:13 (which talks about love/charity). My brothers, father, and I repeated this so often that I memorized it. It was a source of support for my dad, though I could not understand why.

In a period of three consecutive years, my older brother, younger brother, and I moved to my mom's house. At that point my mom no longer went to church, so my brothers found church attendance less important. Having moved to my mother's house during my junior year of high school, I was to discover new friends and a different way of life. The first day of school I met a girl who was very friendly. The second day of school, she invited me to her house for the weekend - to meet her family and visit her church. I was automatically "adopted" into her family as a "good kid" and "good influence" for her. Also, I was surprisingly shocked at the congregation that attended her church. Though I was a stranger, all of the women and men greeted me with hugs and kisses and made me feel welcome.

After continually spending time with the family and attending church on the weekends, they started talking to me about particular beliefs in their Church of Christ. This group went by the New Testament (literal interpretation of Paul's writings). They had no musical instruments in church services - only vocal singing; there were no hired preachers, but elders who would bring sermons each Sunday. Women were not allowed to speak in church. Christmas, Easter, and other holidays were not celebrated, wine and unleavened bread were taken as communion every Sunday, and baptism was seen as immediately necessary at the moment that the sinner decided to become a believer. Though I was already considered a Christian, members of this congregation believed that I was going to hell if I didn't get baptized again - in their church, their way. This was the first major blow to my belief system. Had I grown up in a church where everything had been done wrong? Did I really have to be baptized again?

At one point I had a discussion about faith with my mom. I told her about my confusion and just wanted somebody to clear things up for me. I became critical of sermons at all churches because the preachers would just tell stories and not focus on the Bible. I couldn't understand: if the Bible was so important, why was it not read (solely) in the church service? Though I thought about baptism every Sunday for almost two years, I could not walk forward to be baptized. I would pray to God to push me forward if it were the right thing to do - but it never happened. The next year I went to college and became detached from all churches as a freshman. Some Sundays I would visit churches with friends - only to feel critical of the sermons. I tried to join the Baptist student association, but felt that things were wrong there, too. I had come to college thinking that I would find something like the church of Christ but it was not to be found. When I would return home to my mom's house on occasional weekends, I would visit the church to gain the immediate sense of community and welcoming.

In my Sophomore year, I spent Sundays singing at the Wake Forest church in the choir because I earned good money. Though I didn't support the church beliefs, I endured the sermons to make money. In October of my sophomore year I met a Muslim who lived in my dorm. He was a friendly guy who always seemed to be pondering questions or carrying a deep thought. One evening I spent the entire evening asking him philosophical questions about beliefs and religion. He talked about his beliefs as a Shia' Ismaili Imami Muslim. Though his thoughts did not fully represent this sect of Islam (since he was also confused and searching for answers), his initial statements made me question my own beliefs: are we born into a religion, therefore making it the right one? Day after day I would meet with him and ask questions - wanting to get on the same level of communication that we had reached at our initial meeting - but he would not longer answer the questions or meet the spiritual needs that I had. The following summer I worked at a bookstore and grabbed any books that I could find about Islam. I introduced myself

to another Muslim on campus and started asking him questions about Islam. Instead of looking to him for answers, I was directed to the Quran. Any time I would have general questions about Islam, he would answer them. I went to the local mosque twice during that year and was happy to feel a sense of community again.

After reading about Islam over the summer, I became more sensitive to statements made about Muslims. While taking an introductory half-semester course on Islam, I would feel frustrated when the professor would make a comment that was incorrect, but I didn't know how to correct him. Outside of my personal studies and university class, I became an active worker and supporter of our newly rising campus Islam Awareness Organization. As the only female member, I would be identified to others as "the Christian in the group". Every time a Muslim would say that, I would look at him with puzzlement - because I thought that I was doing all that they had been doing - and that I was a Muslim, too. I had stopped eating pork and became vegetarian, had never liked alcohol, and had begun fasting for the month of *Ramadhan*. But, there still was a difference...

At the end of that year (junior year) other changes were made. I decided to start wearing my hair up - concealed from people. Once again, I thought of this as something beautiful and had an idea that only my husband should be able to see my hair. I hadn't even been told about *Hijab*... since many of the sisters at the mosque did not wear it. That summer I was sitting at school browsing the internet and looking for sites about Islam. I wanted to find e-mail addresses for Muslims, but couldn't find a way. I eventually ventured onto a homepage that was a matrimonial link. I read over some advertisements and tried to find some people within my age range to write to about Islam. I prefaced my initial letters with "I am not seeking marriage - I just want to learn about Islam". Within a few days I had received replies from three Muslims- one from Pakistan/India who was studying in the US, one from India but studying in the UK, and one living in the UAE. Each brother was helpful in unique ways - but I started corresponding with the one

from the US the most because we were in the same time zone. I would send questions to him and he would reply with thorough, logical answers. By this point I knew that Islam was right - all people were equal regardless of color, age, sex, race, etc; I had received answers to troublesome questions by going to the Qur'an, I could feel a sense of community with Muslims, and I had a strong, overwhelming need to declare the *shahada* at a mosque. No longer did I have the "Christian fear" of denouncing the claim of Jesus as God - I believed that there was only one God and there should be no associations with God. One Thursday night in July 1997 I talked with the brother over the phone. I asked more questions and received many more pertinent, logical answers. I decided that the next day I would go to the mosque.

I went to the mosque with the Muslim brother from Wake Forest and his non-Muslim sister, but did not tell him my intentions. I mentioned that I wanted to speak with the imam after the *khutbah* [religious directed talk]. The imam delivered the *khutbah*, the Muslims prayed [which includes praising Allah, recitation of the Quran, and a series of movements which includes bowing to Allah] then he came over to talk with me. I asked him what was necessary to become Muslim. He replied that there are basics to understand about Islam, plus the *shahada* [there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah]. I told him that I had learned about Islam for more than a year and was ready to become Muslim. I recited the *kalimah*... and became Muslim on July 12, 1996, *alhumdulillah* [all praise due to Allah]. That was the first big step. Many doors opened after that - and have continued to open by the grace of Allah. I first began to learn prayer, then visited another *masjid* in Winston-Salem, and began wearing *Hijab* two weeks later.

At my summer job, I had problems with wearing *Hijab*. The bosses didn't like it and "let me go" early for the summer. They didn't think that I could "perform" my job of selling bookbags because the clothing would limit me. But, I found the *Hijab* very liberating. I met

Muslims as they would walk around the mall... everyday I met someone new, *alhumdulillah*. As my senior year of college progressed, I took the lead of the Muslim organization on campus because I found that the brothers were not very active. Since I pushed the brothers to do things and constantly reminded them of events, I received the name "mother Kaci".

During the last half of my Senior year, I took elective courses: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Each course was good because I was a minority representative in each. *Mashallah*, it was nice to represent Islam and to tell people the truth about Muslims and Allah.

7. Ms. Karima Slack Razi

I took the *Shahadah* on September 20, 1991. If you had told me 5 years prior that I would embrace Islam, I never would have believed you. In retrospect, Allah's guidance was so subtle yet consistent, that now I see my whole life as leading up to that moment. It is difficult to encapsulate the exact factors that brought me to Islam because it was a journey, a process, that lasted three years. Those three years were both exhilarating and exhausting. My perceptions of myself and the world changed dramatically. Some beliefs were validated; others, shattered. At times I feared I would lose myself; at other times I knew that this path was my destiny and embraced it. Throughout those years, a series of aspects of Islam intrigued me. Slowly and gradually, my studies led me towards the day when I took the declaration of faith, the *shahadah*.

Prior to my introduction to Islam, I knew that I yearned for more spiritual fulfilment in my life. But, as yet, nothing had seemed acceptable or accessible to me. I had been brought up essentially a secular humanist. Morals were emphasized, but never attributed to any spiritual or divine being. The predominant religion of our country, Christianity, seemed to burden a person with too much guilt. I was not really familiar with any other religions. I wish I could say that, sensing my spiritual void, I embarked on a spiritual quest

and studied various religions in depth. However, I was too comfortable with my life for that. I come from a loving and supportive family. I had many interesting and supportive friends. I thoroughly enjoyed my university studies and I was successful at the university. Instead, it was the "chance" meeting of various Muslims that instigated my study of Islam.

Sharif was one of the first Muslims who intrigued me. He was an elderly man who worked in a tutorial program for affirmative action that I had just entered. He explained that while his job brought little monetary reward, the pleasure he gained from teaching students brought him all the reward he needed. He spoke softly and genuinely. His demeanor more than his words caught me, and I thought, "I hope I have his peace of spirit when I reach his age." That was in 1987.

As I met more Muslims, I was struck not only by their inner peace, but by the strength of their faith. These gentle souls contrasted with the violent, sexist image I had of Islam. Then I met Imran, a Muslim friend of my brother's who I soon realized was the type of man I would like to marry. He was intelligent, sincere, independent, and at peace with himself. When we both agreed that there was potential for marriage, I began my serious studies of Islam. Initially, I had no intention of becoming Muslim; I only desired to understand his religion because he had made it clear that he would want to raise his children as Muslims. My response was: "If they will turn out as sincere, peaceful and kind as he is, then I have no problem with it. But I do feel obligated to understand Islam better first."

In retrospect, I realize that I was attracted to these peaceful souls because I sensed my own lack of inner peace and conviction. There was an inner void that was not completely satisfied with academic success or human relationships. However, at that point I would never have stated that I was attracted to Islam for myself. Rather, I viewed it as an intellectual pursuit. This perception was compatible

with my controlled, academic lifestyle. Since I called myself a feminist, my early reading centered around women in Islam. I thought Islam oppressed women. In my Women's Studies courses I had read about Muslim women who were not allowed to leave their homes and were forced to cover their heads. Of course I saw *Hijab* as an oppressive tool imposed by men rather than as an expression of self-respect and dignity. What I discovered in my readings surprised me. Islam not only does not oppress women, but actually liberates them, having given them rights in the 6th century that we have only gained in this century in this country: the right to own property and wealth and to maintain that in her name after marriage; the right to vote; and the right to divorce.

This realization was not easy in coming....I resisted it every step of the way. But there were always answers to my questions. Why is there polygamy? It is only allowed if the man can treat all four equally and even then it is discouraged. However, it does allow for those times in history when there are more women than men, especially in times of war, so that some women are not deprived of having a relationship and children. Furthermore, it is far superior to the mistress relationship so prevalent here since the woman has a legal right to support should she have a child. This was only one of many questions, the answers to which eventually proved to me that women in Islam are given full rights as individuals in society.

However, these discoveries did not allay all my fears. The following year was one of intense emotional turmoil. Having finished up my courses for my masters in Latin American Studies in the spring of 1989, I decided to take a year to substitute teach. This enabled me to spend a lot of time studying Islam. Many things I was reading about Islam made sense. However, they didn't fit into my perception of the world. I had always perceived of religion as a crutch. But could it be that it was the truth? Didn't religions cause much of the oppression and wars in the world? How then could I be considering marrying a man who followed one of the world's major religions? Every week I was hit with a fresh story on the news, the

radio or the newspaper about the oppression of Muslim women. Could I, a feminist, really be considering marrying into that society? Eyebrows were raised. People talked about me in worried tones behind my back. In a matter of months, my secure world of 24 years was turned upside down. I no longer felt that I knew what was right or wrong. What was black and white was now all grey.

But something kept me going. And it was more than my desire to marry Imran. At any moment I could have walked away from my studies of Islam and been accepted back into a circle of feminist, socialist friends and into the loving arms of my family. While these people never deserted me, they haunted me with their influence. I worried about what they would say or think, particularly since I had always judged myself through the eyes of others. So I secluded myself. I talked only with my family and friends that I knew wouldn't judge me. And I read.

It was no longer an interested, disinterested study of Islam. It was a struggle for my own identity. Up to that time I had produced many successful term papers. I knew how to research and to support a thesis. But my character had never been at stake. For the first time, I realized that I had always written to please others. Now, I was studying for my own spirit. It was scary. Although I knew my friends and family loved me, they couldn't give me the answers. I no longer wanted to lean on their support. Imran was always there to answer my questions. While I admired his patience and his faith that all would turn out for the best, I didn't want to lean too heavily on him out of my own fear that I might just be doing this for a man and not for myself. I felt I had nothing and no one to lean on. Alone, frightened and filled with self-doubt, I continued to read.

After I had satisfied my curiosity about women in Islam and been surprised by the results, I began to read about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and to read the Qu'ran itself. As I read about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), I began to question my initial belief that he was merely an exceptional leader. His honesty prior to

any revelations, his kindness, his sagacity, his insights into his present as well as the future--all made me question my initial premise. His persistence in adversity and, later, his humility in the face of astounding success seemed to belie human nature. Even at the height of his success when he could have enjoyed tremendous wealth, he refused to have more than his poorest companions in Islam.

Slowly I was getting deeper and deeper into the Qu'ran. I asked, "Could a human being be capable of such a subtle, far-reaching book?" Furthermore, there are parts that are meant to guide the Prophet himself, as well as reprimand him. I wondered if the Prophet would have reprimanded himself. As I slowly made my way through the Qu'ran, it became less and less an intellectual activity, and more and more a personal struggle. There were days when I would reject every word--find a way to condemn it, not allow it to be true. But then I would suddenly happen upon a phrase that spoke directly to me. This first happened when I was beginning to experience a lot of inner turmoil and doubt and I read some verses towards the end of the second chapter: "Allah does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear" (2:286). Although I would not have stated that I believed in Allah at that time, when I read these words it was as if a burden was lifted from my heart.

I continued to have many fears as I studied Islam. Would I still be close to my family if I became a Muslim? Would I end up in an oppressive marriage? Would I still be "open-minded?" I believed secular humanism to be the most open-minded approach to life. Slowly I began to realize that secular humanism is as much an ideology, a dogma, as Islam. I realized that everyone had their ideology and I must consciously choose mine. I realized that I had to have trust in my own intellect and make my own decisions--that I should not be swayed by the negative reactions of my "open-minded," "progressive" friends. During this time, as I started keeping more to myself, I was becoming intellectually freer than any time in my life.

Two and a half years later, I had finished the Qu'ran, been delighted by its descriptions of nature and often reassured by its wisdom. I had learned about the extraordinary life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); I had been satisfied by the realization that Islam understands that men and women are different but equal; and I discovered that Islam gave true equality not only to men and women, but to all races and social classes, judging only by one's level of piety.

And I had gained confidence in myself and my own decisions. It was then that I came to the final, critical question: Do I believe in one God? This is the basis of being a Muslim. Having satisfied my curiosity about the rules and historical emergence of Islam, I finally came to this critical question, the essence of being Muslim. It was as if I had gone backwards: starting with the details before I finally reached the spiritual question. I had to wade through the technicalities and satisfy my academic side before I could finally address the spiritual question. Did I.... Could I place my trust in a greater being? Could I relinquish my secular humanist approach to life?

Twice I decided to take the *shahadah* and then changed my mind the next day. One afternoon, I even knelt down and touched my forehead to the floor, as I had often seen Muslims do, and asked for guidance. I felt such peace in that position. Perhaps in that moment I was a Muslim a heart, but when I stood up, my mind was not ready to officially take the *shahadah*.

After that moment a few more weeks passed. I began my new job: teaching high school. The days began to pass very quickly, a flurry of teaching, discipline and papers to correct. As my days began to pass so fast, it struck me that I did not want to pass from this world without having declared my faith in Allah. Intellectually, I understood that the evidence present in the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life and in the Qu'ran was too compelling to deny. And, at that moment, I was also ready in my heart for Islam. I had spent my life longing for a truth in which heart would be compatible with

mind, action with thought, intellect with emotion. I found that reality in Islam. With that reality came true self-confidence and intellectual freedom. A few days after I took the shahadah , I wrote in my journal that finally I have found in Islam the validation of my inner thoughts and intuition. By acknowledging and accepting Allah, I have found the door to spiritual and intellectual freedom.

8. Mrs. Lara - Discovering Islam: A Canadian Muslima's Story

Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem

April 25, 1996

As-Salamu Alaikum wa Rahmahtullahi wa Barakatu (May the peace, the mercy, and the blessings of Allah be upon you). I am Canadian-born of Scandinavian and other ancestry, and I was raised in Canada. I have been a *Muslima* since February 1993 when I was 23. While growing up, I was never affiliated with any religion nor was I an atheist. When I was in my mid-teens I started to think somewhat about religion and at that time I did believe in the Oneness of God (*Tawheed*). Christianity never interested me.

My first contact with Muslims occurred when I was introduced to some Muslim international students in 1988. Through them I learned a bit about Islam, such as Ramadan fasting. But it was really not until 1992 that I became interested in Islam. In the summer of that year a Canadian newspaper published a series of articles attacking Islam by using examples of anti-Islamic behaviour of some Muslims in an attempt to vilify Islam itself. Non-Muslims tend to judge Islam on the basis of the behaviour (which is not necessarily Islamic) of Muslims. I was not yet a *Muslima* but the articles were so outrageous that I sent a letter to the editor in defence of Islam. Now I was curious about Islam. I re-read some articles I had picked up several months earlier from the MSA Islam Awareness Week display at my university. One was about *'Isa (Alaihe Salam)* [Jesus] as a Prophet of Islam. Also, I asked a Muslim to get me some books

about Islam; they were about the overall ideology of Islam and were written by two famous Muslim authors. Impressed, I thought, "This is Islam? It seems so right." Over the next few months in my free time while attending university I continued to learn about Islam from authentic Islamic books, for example The Life of Muhammad *(Salallahu Alaihe wa Salam)*. One certainly does not learn the truth about Islam from the mass media! Also, newcomers to Islam especially must be careful to avoid the writings of deviant groups which claim ties to Islam so as not to be misled. And just because the author has an Arabic name does not necessarily mean that he or she is a knowledgeable Muslim or even Muslim at all. Also, I learned about Islam from some kind, knowledgeable Muslims and *Muslimas* who did not pressure me. Meanwhile, I had begun to Islamize my behaviour which did not require huge change. I already avoided consuming alcohol and pig meat. Also, I always preferred to dress conservatively/modestly and not wear makeup, perfume, or jewellery outside my home. I started to eat only Islamically slaughtered meat. Also during this time I visited a *masjid* (mosque) in my city for the first time.

Until I discovered Islam, I knew almost nothing about it. I say discovered because the "Islam" that I had always heard about through the mass media is not true Islam. I had always assumed that Islam is just another man-made religion, not knowing that it is the Truth. I had also assumed that a person had to be raised as a Muslim to be one. I was not aware of the fact that all humans are born Muslim (in a state of Islam - submitted to the Creator). Like many "Westerners" I associated Islam with the "East" and did not know that Islam is universal in both time and place. However, I never had negative feelings about Islam, *al-Hamdulillah*. The more knowledge that I acquired about Islam, the more I felt that I too can actually be Muslim as I found that many of the beliefs that I already had were actually Islamic not merely "common sense."

So after familiarizing myself with what Islam is basically about and what are the duties and proper conduct of a Muslim person, as

well as thinking and reflecting, I felt ready to accept Islam and live as a *Muslima*. One day while at home I said the *Shahada* (declaration of faith) and began to perform the five daily *salawat* (prayers), *al-Hamdulillah*. That was in February 1993, several days before the fasting month of Ramadan began. I did not want to miss the fasting this time! I found the fasting to be much easier than I had anticipated; before I fasted I had worried that I might faint. At first there was a bit of an adjustment period getting used to the new routine of performing salah and fasting, and I made some mistakes, but it was exciting and not difficult. I started to read the Qur'an (Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation) when I was given one soon after accepting Islam. Before that I had read only excerpts of it in other books. Also in the beginning, I found The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam by Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi to be a useful guide.

In January 1996 (during Ramadan) I started to wear the Islamic headscarf (*Hijab*). I realized that I could not fully submit to Allah (SWT), which is what being Muslim is about, without wearing it. Islam must be accepted and practised in its entirety; it is not an "alter-to-suit-yourself" religion. Since becoming a *Muslima* I was aware that the headscarf is required of Muslim women and I had intended to wear it eventually. I should have worn it immediately upon accepting Islam but for many *Muslimas* (even some from Muslim families) it is not easy to take that step and put it on in a non-Muslim society. It is silly how so many persons get upset over a piece of fabric! Also, it is interesting to note that Christian nuns are never criticized for covering their heads. Never in my life did I have negative feelings toward *muhajjabas* (women who wear *Hijab*) when I saw them. What made me hesitate to put it on was fearing receiving bad treatment from others, especially family. But we must fear Allah (SWT) only, not others. In the few months before I permanently put on *Hijab* I started "practising" wearing it. I wore it when I travelled between my home and the local *masjid* on Fridays when I started attending the *jum'a* salah (Friday congregational prayer). (Of course, since becoming Muslim I always wore it during every salah). A

couple of weeks prior, in *du'a* I began asking Allah (SWT) to make it easy for me to wear it.

The day I finally put it on permanently I had reached the point where I felt that I could no longer go out with a bare head, and I thought "tough bananas" if others do not like me wearing it since I alone am accountable for my actions and am required to perform my Islamic duties, and I could never please everyone anyway. Sometimes opposition to *Hijab* is a control issue: some persons just plainly do not like those who are determined and independent especially if it is their child.

Upon wearing it I immediately felt protected and was finally able to go out and not be the target of stares/leers from men. At first I felt a bit self-conscious but after several weeks I felt completely used to wearing *Hijab*. Sometimes other persons look puzzled/confused, I think because they are not used to seeing pale-faced, blue-eyed *Muslimas*! By the way, wearing *Hijab* is *da'wah* in a way as it draws attention to Islam.

Since accepting Islam I continue to seek knowledge about the *Deen* (religion) which is a lifelong duty for all Muslims--male and female. Currently, I am learning Arabic and hope to be able to read the Qur'an in Arabic soon, *insha'Allah*. Reading, discussing Islam with other Muslims, and the Friday *jum'a khutba* are all educational. Striving to be as pious as one can be and fighting against one's own evil traits *(jihad al-nafs)* takes effort and is continuous and never ending for Muslims. I find Islam ever-more fascinating, and I enjoy living as a Muslima.

9. Ms. Malaak

I am a new Muslim woman from Richmond, VA. I had never even met Muslims before last year, and had no idea that there was an Islamic center in my own city. However, at that time, I was very interested in Islam, but I could find nothing to read. I read encyclopaedias and any books I could get my hands on, but they

were all written by non-Muslims. They said that Muhammad (saws) wrote the Qur'an in the 7th century, that Muslims worshipped the black stone, and that Islam bred hatred towards women. They also said that Muhammad (saws) copied the Bible, that Islam was spread with the Qur'an in one hand and the sword in the other, and implied (if not stated directly) that all Muslims were Arab. One book even said that the word "Allah" came from al-lot, the moon god of the pagan Arabs. These are just some of the lies I read.

Then, one day, two Pakistani Muslim women (who were also *muhajjabas* [wearing *Hijab* -ed.]) came to my college. I befriended them, and then I started asking them all kinds of questions. I had already left Christianity when I was 12, so I felt no challenge to my personal beliefs. I was a biology major and had basically no religion. I was amazed at what they told me, and I realized that all of my previous knowledge was lies. Then, I came home for the summer. I got my own apartment and started working at 7-11. While I was working, a black *muhajjaba* came in the store. I asked her where she worshipped and when she told me there was an Islamic center on the same street I was working on, I was amazed.

I went the next day, but no one was there. So I went the day after that day (which happened to be Friday) and found some people there. A man told me to come the next week at noon so I could meet some of the ladies. But when he said "noon," he meant "*dhuhr*," not 12. I didn't know that. So I came at 12 the following week, but no one was there. For some reason, I decided to wait, Subhan-Allah. And wait I did, for an hour and a half (*jumaa'* [Friday prayer -ed.] is at 2), and finally I meet some people. A lady there gave me a copy of Maurice Bucaille's The Bible, Qur'an, and Science. When I read it, I knew that I wanted to become a Muslim. After all, I was a biology major. I knew that the things in the Qur'an had to be from Allah (swt), and not from an illiterate, uneducated man. So I went the next week and took *shahaada* [i.e. stated and accepted the creed of Islam -ed.] When my dad found out, he went crazy. He came to my

apartment and tore up everything in it, including my Qur'an. I called the police, and they came out. But they refused to help. They said "Don't you think he's right?" and so on. So I fled to Nashville, TN.

I have continued to talk with my dad, though, because the Qur'an says to honour your parents (it does not distinguish between *Kaafir* (a non-believer and Muslim parents), and because I remember the story of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (raa). He hated Islam so much that he used to beat his slave girl until his arm grew tired. *Al-Hamdu Lillah,* Allah (swt) has rewarded me for my efforts. I saw my father for the first time this summer, he accepted it without too much commentary. I think he realizes now that he can't bully me into renouncing Islam.

10. Michelle

As-salaamu-alaikum,

I come from a Jewish family in New York. My mother was from S. A. but also Jewish. She never was comfortable with anyone knowing that. When my father died, she remarried a Catholic and became one herself. And that is how she brought us up. From the age of 5 I was told that Jesus was also God...? I never felt comfortable with it.

We moved to the Philippines - that is where my stepfather was from. And life there was unbearable. My stepfather, to put it mildly, was abusive to me and my 2 brothers. The effect of that hard life: my spelling is poor, one of my brothers is now a drinker, and the other has a low self worth.

When I grew up and we returned to the USA, I left home. I took care of myself by working hard. I never had time for God, whoever He was. I did not feel that God helped me in any way, so why bother? I did try to get back to my roots but Judaism made no sense, so I let that go. I did come across Muslims from time to time but the effect was how do they dress that way, and why do they seem

different? Over time, the idea of Islam kept coming back to me, so I tried to find out more. I read the history and life of Mohammed (saas). That is what got to me: such kindness and *sabr* (patience) in the face of hardships.

It seemed to me that my life had no direction, so I went to learn more. After reading surah Al-Fatihah, I knew I had come home - this is where I wanted to be! I became a Muslim and have never regretted it. I always knew there was only ONE God - ALLAH - and things have not been always easy for me. My mother died of cancer soon after I became a Muslim. But the faith I have helped me make it. Just being able to go to ALLAH with all my pain was such a relief. It is the only true lifestyle known to man, and it is the truth and the last chance for us. I wish all mankind could come to know the truth (haqq) of Islam, and its peace and beauty!

11. Ms. Natassia M Kelly

I was raised to believe in God from childhood. I attended church nearly every Sunday, went to Bible school, and sang in the choir. Yet religion was never a really big part of my life. There were times when I thought myself close to God. I often prayed to him for guidance and strength in times of despair or for a wish in times of want. But I soon realized that this feeling of closeness soon evaporated when I was no longer begging God for something. I realized that I even though I believed, I lacked faith.

I perceived the world to be a game in which God indulged in from time to time. He inspired people to write a Bible and somehow people were able to find faith within this Bible. As I grew older and became more aware of the world, I believed more in God. I believed that there had to be a God to bring some order to the chaotic world. If there were no God, I believed the world would have ended in utter anarchy thousands of years ago. It was comfort to me to believe there was a supernatural force guiding and protecting man.

Children usually assume their religion from parents. I was no different. At the age of 12, I began to give in depth thinking to my spirituality. I realized there was a void in my life where a faith should be. Whenever I was in need or despair, I simply prayed to someone called Lord. But who was this Lord truly? I once asked my mother who to pray to, Jesus or God. Believing my mother to be right, I prayed to Jesus and to him I attributed all good things. I have heard that religion cannot be argued. My friends and I tried to do this many times. I often had debates with my friends about Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. Through these debates I searched within myself more and more and decided I should do something about my emptiness. And so at the age of 13, I began my search for truth.

Humankind is always in constant pursuit of knowledge or the truth. My search for truth could not be deemed as an active pursuit of knowledge. I continued having the debates, and I read the Bible more. But it did not really extend from this. During this period of time my mother took notice of my behavior and from then on I have been in a "religious phase." My behavior was far from a phase. I simply shared my newly gained knowledge with my family. I learned about the beliefs, practices, and doctrines within Christianity and minimal beliefs and practices within Judaism.

A few months within my search I realized that if I believe in Christianity I believed myself to be condemned to Hell. Not even considering the sins of my past, I was on a "one way road to Hell" as southern ministers tend to say. I could not believe all the teachings within Christianity. However, I did try. I can remember many times being in church and fighting with myself during the Call to Discipleship. I was told that by simply confessing Jesus to be my Lord and Savior I would be guaranteed eternal life in Heaven. I never did walk down the aisle to the pastor's outstretched hands, and my reluctance even increased my fears of heading for Hell. During this time I was at unease. I often had alarming nightmares, and I felt very alone in the world.

But not only did I lack belief but I had many questions that I posed to every knowledgeable Christian I could find and never really did receive a satisfactory answer. I was simply told things that confused me even more. I was told that I am trying to put logic to God and if I had faith I could simply believe and go to Heaven. Well, that was the problem: I did not have faith. I did not believe. I did not really believe in anything. I did believe there was a God and that Jesus was his son sent to save humankind. That was it. My questions and reasoning did, however, exceed my beliefs. The questions went on and on. My perplexity increased. My uncertainty increased. For fifteen years I had blindly followed a faith simply because it was the faith of my parents. Something happened in my life in which the little faith I did have decreased to all but nothing. My search came to a stop. I no longer searched within myself, the Bible. or church. I had given up for a while. I was a very bitter person until one day a friend gave me a book. It was called "The Muslim-Christian Dialogue."

I took the book and read it. I am ashamed to say that during my searching never did I once consider another religion. Christianity was all I knew, and I never thought about leaving it. My knowledge of Islam was very minimal. In fact, it was mainly filled with misconception and stereotypes. The book surprised me. I found that I was not the only one who believed there was a simply a God. I asked for more books. I received them as well as pamphlets. I learned about Islam from an intellectual aspect. I had a close friend who was Muslim and I often asked her questions about the practices. Never did I once consider Islam as my faith. Many things about Islam alienated me. After a couple months of reading the month of Ramadan began. Every Friday I joined the local Muslim community for the breaking of the fast and the reciting of the Quran. I posed questions that I may have come across to the Muslim girls. I was in awe at how someone could have so much certainty in what they believed and followed. I felt myself drawn to the religion that alienated me. Having believed for so long that I was alone, Islam did comfort me in many ways. Islam was brought as a reminder to the world. It was brought to lead the people back to the right path.

Beliefs were not the only thing important to me. I wanted a discipline to pattern my life by. I did not just want to believe someone was my savior and through this I held the ticket to Heaven. I wanted to know how to act to receive the approval of God. I wanted a closeness to God. I wanted to be God-conscious. Most of all I wanted a chance for heaven. I began to feel that Christianity did not give this to me, but Islam did. I continued learning more. I went to the *Eid* celebration and *jumua* and weekly classes with my friends. Through religion one receives peace of mind. A calmness about them. This I had off and on for about three years. During the off times I was more susceptible to the temptations of Satan. In early February of 1997 I came to the realization that Islam was right and true. However, I did not want to make any hasty decisions. I did decide to wait. Within this duration the temptations of Satan increased. I can recollect two dreams in which he was a presence. Satan was calling me to him. After I awoke from these nightmares I found solace in Islam. I found myself repeating the *Shahadah*. These dreams almost made me change my mind. I confided them in my Muslim friend. She suggested that maybe Satan was there to lead me from the truth. I never thought of it that way.

On March 19, 1997 after returning from a weekly class, I recited the *Shahadah* to myself. Then on March 26, I recited it before witnesses and became an official Muslim. I cannot express the joy I felt. I cannot express the weight that was lifted from my shoulders. I had finally received my peace of mind. It has been about five months since I recited the *Shahadah*. Islam has made me a better person. I am stronger now and understand things more. My life has changed significantly. I now have purpose. My purpose is to prove myself worthy of eternal life in *Jannah*. I have my long sought after faith. Religion is a part of me all the time. I am striving everyday to become the best Muslim I can be. People are often amazed at how a fifteen year old can make such an important decision in life. I am

grateful that Allah blessed me with my state of mind that I was able to find it so young.

Striving to be a good Muslim in a Christian dominated society is hard. Living with a Christian family is even harder. However, I do not try to get discouraged. I do not wish to dwell on my present predicament, but I believe that my jihad is simply making me stronger. Someone once told me that I am better off than some people who were born into Islam, in that I had to find, experience, and realize the greatness and mercy of Allah. I have acquired the reasoning that seventy years of life on earth is nothing compared to eternal life in Paradise. I must admit that I lack the aptitude to express the greatness, mercy, and glory of Allah. I hope my account helped others who may feel the way I felt or struggle the way I struggled.

as salamu alaikum wa rahmatullahee wa barakatuhu,

Natassia M. Kelly

12. Sister Penomee (Dr. Kari Ann Owen, Ph.D.)

July 4, 1997. A salaam aleikum, beloved family. "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammed is his messenger." These are the words of the Shahadah oath, I believe. The Creator is known by many names. His wisdom is always recognizable, and his presence made manifest in the love, tolerance and compassion present in our community. His profound ability to guide us from a war-like individualism so rampant in American society to a belief in the glory and dignity of the Creator's human family, and our obligations to and membership within that family. This describes the maturation of a spiritual personality, and perhaps the most desirable maturation of the psychological self, also.

My road to *Shahadah* began when an admired director, Tony Richardson, died of AIDS. Mr. Richardson was already a brilliant and

internationally recognized professional when I almost met him backstage at the play Luther at age 14. Play writing for me has always been a way of finding degrees of spiritual and emotional reconciliation both within myself and between myself and a world I found rather brutal due to childhood circumstances. Instead of fighting with the world, I let my conflicts fight it out in my plays. Amazingly, some of us have even grown up together! So as I began accumulating stage credits (productions and staged readings), beginning at age 17, I always retained the hope that I would someday fulfil my childhood dream of studying and working with Mr. Richardson. When he followed his homosexuality to America (from England) and a promiscuous community, AIDS killed him, and with him went another portion of my sense of belonging to and within American society. I began to look outside American and Western society to Islamic culture for moral guidance. Why Islam and not somewhere else? My birthmother's ancestors were Spanish Jews who lived among Muslims until the Inquisition expelled the Jewish community in 1492. In my historical memory, which I feel at a deep level, the call of the muezzin is as deep as the lull of the ocean and the swaying of ships, the pounding of horses' hooves across the desert, the assertion of love in the face of oppression.

I felt the birth of a story within me, and the drama took form as I began to learn of an Ottoman caliph's humanity toward Jewish refugees at the time of my ancestors' expulsions. Allah guided my learning, and I was taught about Islam by figures as diverse as Imam Siddiqi of the South Bay Islamic Association; Sister Hussein of Rahima; and my beloved adopted Sister, Maria Abdin, who is Native American and Muslim and a writer for the SBIA magazine, IQRA. My first research interview was in a *halal* butcher shop in San Francisco's Mission District, where my understanding of living Islam was profoundly affected by the first Muslim lady I had ever met: a customer who was in *Hijab*, behaved with a sweet kindness and grace and also read, wrote and spoke four languages. Her brilliance, coupled with her amazing (to me) freedom from arrogance, had a

profound effect on the beginnings of my knowledge of how Islam can affect human behavior.

Little did I know then that not only would a play be born, but a new Muslim. The course of my research introduced me to much more about Islam than a set of facts, for Islam is a living religion. I learned how Muslims conduct themselves with a dignity and kindness which lifts them above the American slave market of sexual competition and violence. I learned that Muslim men and women can actually be in each others' presence without tearing each other to pieces, verbally and physically. And I learned that modest dress, perceived as a spiritual state, can uplift human behavior and grant to both men and women a sense of their own spiritual worth.

Why did this seem so astonishing, and so astonishingly new? Like most American females, I grew up in a slave market, comprised not only of the sexual sicknesses of my family, but the constant negative judging of my appearance by peers beginning at ages younger than seven. I was taught from a very early age by American society that my human worth consisted solely of my attractiveness (or, in my case, lack of it) to others. Needless to say, in this atmosphere, boys and girls, men and women, often grew to resent each other very deeply, given the desperate desire for peer acceptance, which seemed almost if not totally dependent not on one's kindness or compassion or even intelligence, but on looks and the perception of those looks by others.

While I do not expect or look for human perfection among Muslims, the social differences are profound, and almost unbelievable to someone like myself. I do not pretend to have any answers to the conflicts of the Middle East, except what the prophets, beloved in Islam, have already expressed. My disabilities prevent me from fasting, and from praying in the same prayer postures as most of you. But I love and respect the Islam I have come to know through the behavior and words of the men and women I have come to know in AMILA (American Muslims Intent

on Learning and Activism) and elsewhere, where I find a freedom from cruel emotional conflicts and a sense of imminent spirituality.

What else do I feel and believe about Islam? I support and deeply admire Islam's respect for same sex education; for the rights of women as well as men in society; for modest dress; and above all for sobriety and marriage, the two most profound foundations of my life, for I am 21 1/2 years sober and happily married. How wonderful to feel that one and half billion Muslims share my faith in the character development marriage allows us, and also in my decision to remain drug- and alcohol-free. What, then, is Islam's greatest gift in a larger sense? In a society which presents us with constant pressure to immolate ourselves on the altars of unbridled instinct without respect for consequences, Islam asks us to regard ourselves as human persons created by Allah with the capacity for responsibility in our relations with others. Through prayer and charity and a commitment to sobriety and education, if we follow the path of Islam, we stand a good chance of raising children who will be free from the violence and exploitation which is robbing parents and children of safe schools and neighborhoods, and often of their lives.

The support of the AMILA community and other friends, particularly at a time of some strife on the AMILA Net, causes me to affirm my original responses to Islam and declare that this is a marvellous community, for in its affirmation of Allah's gifts of marriage, sobriety and other forms of responsibility, Islam shows us the way out of hell. My husband, Silas, and I are grateful for your presence and your friendship. And as we prepare to lay the groundwork for adoption, we hope that we will continue to be blessed with your warm acceptance, for we want our child to feel the spiritual presence of Allah in the behavior of surrounding adults and children. We hope that as other AMILA'ers consider becoming new parents, and become new parents, a progressive Islamic school might emerge... progressive meaning supportive and loving as well as superior in academics, arts and sports.

Maybe our computer whizzes will teach science and math while I teach creative writing and horseback riding! Please consider us companions on the journey toward heaven, and please continue to look for us at your gatherings, on the AMILA net and in the colors and dreams of the sunset. For there is no god but Allah, the Creator, and Muhammad, whose caring for the victims of war and violence still brings tears from me, is his Prophet.

A salaam aleikum.

13. Mrs. Shariffa Carlo

The story of how I reverted to al Islam is a story of plans. I made plans, the group I was with made plans, and Allah made plans. And Allah is the Best of Planners. When I was a teenager, I came to the attention of a group of people with a very sinister agenda. They were and probably still are a loose association of individuals who work in government positions but have a special agenda - to destroy Islam. It is not a governmental group that I am aware of; they simply use their positions in the US government to advance their cause.

One member of this group approached me because he saw that I was articulate, motivated and very much the women's rights advocate. He told me that if I studied International Relations with an emphasis in the Middle East, he would guarantee me a job at the American Embassy in Egypt. He wanted me to eventually go there to use my position in the country to talk to Muslim women and encourage the fledgling women's rights movement. I thought this was a great idea. I had seen the Muslim women on TV; I knew they were a poor oppressed group, and I wanted to lead them to the light of 20th century freedom.

With this intention, I went to college and began my education. I studied Quran, hadith and Islamic history. I also studied the ways I could use this information. I learned how to twist the words to say what I wanted them to say. It was a valuable tool. Once I started

learning, however, I began to be intrigued by this message. It made sense. That was very scary. Therefore, in order to counteract this effect, I began to take classes in Christianity. I chose to take classes with this one professor on campus because he had a good reputation and he had a Ph.D. in Theology from Harvard University. I felt I was in good hands. I was, but not for the reasons I thought. It turns out that this professor was a Unitarian Christian. He did not believe in the trinity or the divinity of Jesus. In actuality, he believed that Jesus was a prophet.

He proceeded to prove this by taking the Bible from its sources in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic and show where they were changed. As he did this, he showed the historical events which shaped and followed these changes. By the time I finished this class, my *deen* had been destroyed, but I was still not ready to accept Islam. As time went on, I continued to study, for myself and for my future career. This took about three years. In this time, I would question Muslims about their beliefs. One of the individuals I questioned was a Muslim brother. *Alhamdulillah*, he saw my interest in the *deen*, and made it a personal effort to educate me about Islam. May Allah increase his reward. He would give me *dawaa* at every opportunity which presented itself.

One day, this man contacts me, and he tells me about a group of Muslims who were visiting in town. He wanted me to meet them. I agreed. I went to meet with them after *ishaa* prayer. I was led to a room with at least 20 men in it. They all made space for me to sit, and I was placed face to face with an elderly Pakistani gentleman. *Mashallah*, this brother was a very knowledgeable man in matters of Christianity. He and I discussed and argued the varying parts of the bible and the Quraan until the *fajr*. At this point, after having listened to this wise man tell me what I already knew, based on the class I had taken in Christianity, he did what no other individual had ever done. He invited me to become a Muslim. In the three years I had been searching and researching, no one had ever invited me. I had been

taught, argued with and even insulted, but never invited. May Allah guide us all. So when he invited me, it clicked. I realized this was the time. I knew it was the truth, and I had to make a decision. *Alhamdulillah*, Allah opened my heart, and I said, "Yes. I want to be a Muslim." With that, the man led me in the *shahadah* - in English and in Arabic. I swear by Allah that when I took the *shahadah*, I felt the strangest sensation. I felt as if a huge, physical weight had just been lifted off my chest; I gasped for breath as if I were breathing for the first time in my life. *Alhamdulillah*, Allah had given me a new life - a clean slate - a chance for Jennah, and I pray that I live the rest of my days and die as a Muslim. *Ameen.*

Shariffa A Carlo (Al Andalusia)

14. Ms. Sumaya Fannoun /Erin

April 12, 1998. *Bismillah Arahman Araheem.* My intention in writing my story is that for Allah's sake, I may help someone who is searching for the Truth, to realize that they have found it in Al Islam. I began writing this on Easter Sunday, kind of appropriate, I think. I have been Muslim now for seven years, *Alhamdu Lillah* (all praise is for Allah, [God]). I first learned of Islam while attending University, from a Muslim friend of mine. I had managed to get out of a very good, college-prep high school believing that the Qur'an was a Jewish book, and that Muslims were idol worshipping pagans. I was not interested in learning about a new religion. I held the ethnocentric view that if since the US was "#1", we must have the best of everything, including religion. I knew that Christianity wasn't perfect, but believed that it was the best that there was. I had long held the opinion that although the Bible contained the word of God, it also contained the word of the common man, who wrote it down.

As Allah would have it, every time I had picked up the Bible in my life, I had come across some really strange and actually dirty passages. I could not understand why the Prophets of God would do such abominable things when there are plenty of average people who

live their whole lives without thinking of doing such disgusting and immoral things, such as those attributed to Prophets David, Solomon, and Lot, (peace be upon them all) just to name a few. I remember hearing in Church that since these Prophets commit such sins, how could the common people be any better than them? And so, it was said, Jesus had to be sacrificed for our sins, because we just couldn't help ourselves, as the "flesh is weak".

So, I wrestled with the notion of the trinity, trying to understand how my God was not one, but three. One who created the earth, one whose blood was spilled for our sins, and then there was the question of the Holy Ghost, yet all one and the same!? When I would pray to God, I had a certain image in my mind of a wise old man in flowing robe, up in the clouds. When I would pray to Jesus, I pictured a young white man with long golden hair, beard and blue eyes. As for the Holy Spirit, well, I could only conjure up a misty creature whose purpose I wasn't sure of. It really didn't feel as though I was praying to one God. I found though that when I was really in a tight spot, I would automatically call directly on God. I knew inherently, that going straight to God, was the best bet.

When I began to research and study Islam, I didn't have a problem with praying to God directly, it seemed the natural thing to do. However, I feared forsaking Jesus, and spent a lot of time contemplating the subject. I began to study the Christian history, searching for the truth. The more I looked into it, the more I saw the parallel between the deification and sacrifice of Jesus, and the stories of Greek mythology that I had learned in junior high, where a god and a human woman would produce a child which would be a demigod, possessing some attributes of a god. I learned of how important it had been to "St. Paul", to have this religion accepted by the Greeks to whom he preached, and how some of the disciples had disagreed with his methods. It seemed very probable that this could have been a more appealing form of worship to the Greeks than the strict monotheism of the Old Testament. And only Allah knows.

I began to have certain difficulties with Christian thought while still in high school. Two things bothered me very much. The first was the direct contradiction between material in the Old and New Testaments. I had always thought of the Ten Commandments as very straight forward, simple rules that God obviously wanted us to follow. Yet, worshipping Christ, was breaking the first commandment completely and totally, by associating a partner with God. I could not understand why an omniscient God would change His mind, so to speak. Then there is the question of repentance. In the Old Testament, people are told to repent for their sins; but in the New Testament, it is no longer necessary, as Christ was sacrificed for the sins of the people. "Paul did not call upon his hearers to repent of particular sins, but rather announced God's victory over all sin in the cross of Christ. The radical nature of God's power is affirmed in Paul's insistence that in the death of Christ God has rectified the ungodly (see Romans 4:5). Human beings are not called upon to do good works in order that God may rectify them." So what incentive did we even have to be good, when being bad could be a lot of fun? Society has answered by redefining good and bad. Any childcare expert will tell you that children must learn that their actions have consequences, and they encourage parents to allow them to experience the natural consequences of their actions. Yet in Christianity, there are no consequences, so people have begun to act like spoiled children. Demanding the right to do as they please, demanding God's and peoples' unconditional love and acceptance of even vile behavior. It is no wonder that our prisons are over-flowing, and that parents are at a loss to control their children. That is not to say that in Islam we believe that we get to heaven based on our deeds, on the contrary, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) told us that we will only enter paradise through God's Mercy, as evidenced in the following hadith.

Narrated 'Aisha:

The Prophet said, "Do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately, and receive good news because one's good deeds will not

make him enter Paradise." They asked, "Even you, O Allah's Apostle?" He said, "Even I, unless and until Allah bestows His pardon and Mercy on me."

So in actuality, I did not even know who God was. If Jesus was not a separate god, but really part of God, then who was he sacrificed to? And who was he praying to in the Garden of Gethsemane? If he was separate in nature from God, then you have left the realm of monotheism, which is also in direct contradiction to the teachings of the Old Testament. It was so confusing, that I preferred not to think of it, and had begun to thoroughly resent the fact that I could not understand my own religion. That point was brought home when I began to discuss religion with my future husband at college. He asked me to explain the Trinity to him. After several failed attempts at getting him to understand it, I threw my hands up in frustration, and claimed that I couldn't explain it well because, "I am not a scholar!" To which he calmly replied, "Do you have to be a scholar to understand the basis of your religion?" Ouch!, that really hurt; but the truth hurts sometimes. By that point, I had tired of the mental acrobatics required to contemplate who I was actually worshipping. I grudgingly listened while he told me of the Oneness of God, and that He had not changed his mind, but completed his message to mankind through the Prophet Muhammad, Allah's peace and blessings be upon him. I had to admit, it made sense. God had sent prophets in succession to mankind for centuries, because they obviously kept going astray, and needed guidance. Even at that point, I told him that he could tell me about his religion, just for my general information. "But don't try to convert me", I told him, "because you'll never do it!" "No", he said, "I just want you to understand where I'm coming from and it is my duty as a Muslim to tell you." And of course, he didn't convert me; but rather, Allah guided me to His Truth. *Alhamdu Lillah.*

At about the same time, a friend of mine gave me a "translation" of the Qur'an in English that she found at a book store. She had no

way of knowing that this book was actually written by an Iraqi Jew for the purpose of driving people away from Islam, not for helping them to understand it. It was very confusing. I circled and marked all the passages that I wanted to ask my Muslim friend about and when he returned from his trip abroad, I accosted him with my questions, book in hand. He could not tell from the translation that it was supposed to be the Qur'an, and patiently informed me of the true meaning of the verses and the conditions under which they were revealed. He found a good translation of the meaning of the Qur'an for me to read, which I did. I still remember sitting alone, reading it, looking for errors, and questioning. The more I read, the more I became convinced that this book could only have one source, God. I was reading about God's mercy and His willingness to forgive any sin, except the sin of associating partners with Him; and I began to weep. I cried from the depth of my soul. I cried for my past ignorance and in joy of finally finding the truth. I knew that I was forever changed. I was amazed at the scientific knowledge in the Qur'an, which is not taken from the Bible as some would have you believe. I was getting my degree in microbiology at that time, and was particularly impressed with the description of the embryological process, and so much more. Once I was sure that this book was truly from God, I decided that I had to accept Islam as my religion. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

I learned that the first and most important step of becoming Muslim is to believe in *"La illaha il Allah, wa Muhammad arasool Allah",* meaning that there is no god worthy of worship except Allah, and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. After I understood that Jesus was sent as a prophet, to show the Jews that they were going astray, and bring them back to the path of God, I had no trouble with the concept of worshipping God alone. But I did not know who Muhammad was, and didn't understand what it really meant to follow him. May Allah bless all those people who have helped me to understand and appreciate the life of the Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him), throughout these last seven years. I learned that Allah sent him as an example to mankind. An example

to be followed and imitated by all of us in our daily lives. He was in his behaviors, the Qur'an exemplified. May Allah guide us all to live as he taught us.

15. Ms. Themise Cruz

February 27, 1997. If anyone were to ask me when I became Muslim, I guess the only feasible answer would be that I was born Muslim, but just wasn't aware of it. We are all born into a state of Islam, but what is unfortunate is that many people never recognize this fact, and live lost in other circles of religion and lifestyles. I was horribly lost, and I suppose this was a good thing, because Allah felt my suffering and reached out to me. (*al humd dulilah*)

My first introduction to Islam was through a course at the University where during Ramadan we were invited to Juma prayer. It was here where I met a wonderful Muslim sister who invited me to her home for study and food. I declined at the time because it seemed too foreign to me. I had built up so many stereotypes that I was not willing to open my mind to anything surrounding Islam, even an invitation to knowledge. The next message Allah sent me came by my friendship with several Arab Muslims at one of the Technical Colleges near my home. This is where I was exposed to the Islamic lifestyle. I was amazed at the fact that they refused invitations to wild parties and drinking alcohol. How could they sit and pray so many times a day. And fasting for a whole month, what had gotten into these people? From that point forward, I thought I was the American authority on Islam. But in actuality I knew nothing. The height of my confusion hit at this point. I was an observer, but never had any understanding of what it all meant.

So, when I became a Muslim it was like Allah found me and gave me the answers to all the confusion that ran around in my head. It is so mind boggling to me that I was oblivious to the fact that I was so miserable. I was successful in the material aspects of life, but my mind and heart were uneasy. I was so weak in spirit that I tricked

myself in believing that the material things that laid at my feet, were enough to cushion any hurtful blow that life dealt me. I was wrong. My mother died when I was 23, and all the money, my home, my education, the cars, jewellery, they all meant nothing. I tried to go on with life as though her death was just another event. But it was at this point that I could no longer ignore Allah. If I went on in my current state of mind, then my mother's life had been in vain. What purpose did she serve here on this earth? To what greater significance did her life have in this world? I could not believe that she meant so little. It was at this point that I began to hunger for this knowledge, and I opened all of myself to Allah.

It is almost too difficult to describe what it is like for someone who begins to feel Allah in their heart. Islam means so much more than rituals, language, culture or country. Islam is a glorious state of being, and it is a fundamentally different experience than what I had previously been learning. My husband taught me much of what I know about Islam today. While observing, listening and opening my heart, I slowly began to understand. Allah presents himself to people in different ways, and Allah impacts everyone's life differently. I had to come to an understanding of what Allah meant to me, and why it was necessary that I follow this path of life. I began to learn the meaning and significance behind the rituals I had only before observed at a primitive level. I began to read Koran for hours at a time. Allah began to reach out to me and fill the vast hole that was in my heart. For when an individual does not follow the path of Allah, they are in a constant search for that missing element. And once I stopped refusing the knowledge of Islam and opened my heart to my fellow Muslims and the teachings of the Koran, the transition was as easy as eating a piece of pecan pie.

Since then I have had contact with the original Muslim sister who I met in my university class. Many of the Muslim sisters get together once a month for study, prayer and informational sessions. I also visit the *Masjed* during *Juma* prayers and any other time that my schedule permits. Of course my husband and myself study Koran

and Hadith, and are on a constant quest for knowledge. When you become a Muslim it is the beginning of a new path, a new way of life. Everyday Allah reveals himself to me in some way. Sometimes it is with a new piece of knowledge, or maybe he grants me patience or understanding, and some days it is perseverance or a peaceful state of mind. No matter what the case I am always aware of the blessings that Allah presents to me, and I continuously work to live the way He has intended all of us as human beings to live, in submission to His will.

I have also struggled throughout this search. My family is not accepting of my new way of life, nor are they accepting of my husband. I had a co-worker ask me one time, "How can you abandon Jesus? I love Jesus" My response confused her I am sure. I simply explained that in Islam we abandon nobody. And in fact it is only now that I can read and understand the true significance of Jesus. Islam allows the follower to study the messages that Allah has sent throughout the ages, through the teachings of Jesus, Abraham and Mohammed (Peace and Blessings be upon them). Because of this fact, as Muslims, knowledge is never hidden from us, and we are free in our search for truth and closeness to Allah.

My struggle is far from over. Western culture is not accepting or understanding of Islam, and it is mostly out of ignorance that this is so. They think that we are fundamentalists or terrorists, or some other form of monster here to wreak havoc in a peaceful Christian world. The way in which I combat the unkind comments and glares is through kindness and understanding. I remember a point when my understanding was so low that I closed my mind and heart to anything that the Muslim community had to say. And to think that if they had turned me away because of my ignorance, I would not be where I am today. So it is up to all Muslims to have patience and compassion for those who do not understand our way of life. Eventually Allah reveals himself to those who seek true knowledge and understanding.

Brothers

1. Mr. Christopher Shelton

October 28, 1996. My conversion to Islam began in my eighth grade year. There was a Muslim student by the name of Raphael who first told me a little about Islam. At the time he was not so knowledgeable about Islam, but he put the initial interest in my mind which never went away. In the ninth grade there was another student by the name of Leonard who claimed at one time or another that he was a Muslim but he was more or less a pretender. The one thing he did do was to give me a pamphlet on true Islam which increased my interest in Islam. I didn't hear much more about Islam until my tenth grade year.

That year me and Leonard would sit in the back of geometry class and blame all of the world's problems on white people while we would exalt the status of black people above all other races. At that time in my life I thought that Islam was the religion for black people, but unfortunately the Islam I was talking about was nothing more than black nationalism with a slight touch of true Islam. It was very similar to The Nation of Islam. As time went on I began to see that my black nationalist views and my perception of what Islam was about became tired. It was useless to hate almost all white people and to blame this on Islam. Around the same time I totally denounced Christianity as my religion. I got tired of the unintelligible doctrines and the many contradictions within the religion.

The next year of high school I was conversing with a few students about religion and they told me to buy a Qu'ran so I did. I went to the nearest bookstore and bought a very poor translation of the Qu'ran but it was the first real look into the truth about Islam. Within a few weeks I took on the beliefs of a Muslim even though I hadn't taken *shahadah* yet. Most of what I was doing concerning Islam was wrong because I never had a chance to go to a masjid because my mother totally forbade it. As time went on I finally got

an Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation of the Qu'ran which opened my eyes to so much about Islam. In the meantime my mother was doing everything in her power to prevent me from embracing Islam. She took me to see her preacher three times which was of no avail. As time passed I began to learn more and more about Islam from various books I could get my hands on. I finally learned how to make *salat* correctly from one of these books. My mother was still trying her best to make me become a Christian again.

My mother and I would frequently argue about religion until one day my mother had enough and told my dad that I was going to have to live with him. He had absolutely no problem with this. The day after I graduated from high school I moved in with my dad. I can see now that my parent's divorce was actually a blessing in disguise. Their divorce provided me with a place to live in which I could practice Islam freely. My dad had no problem with my interest in Islam.

One day I called the Islamic Learning Center in Fayetteville and a brother by the name of Mustafa told me to come down for the *Taleem* (lesson) to learn more about Islam. Everybody was extremely hospitable and Mustafa even gave me a ride home. After three weeks of going to *Jumuah* (Friday congregational prayers) and Taleem I finally took my *Shahadah* on July 2, 1995. Ever since then I have been an active member of the Islamic community. I am also very pleased to say that Raphael (the person who gave me my initial in interest in Islam) got back to Islam seriously and took S*hahadah* a few months before I did. We still keep in touch even though he is in England.

2. Mr. David Pradarelli

February 25, 1997. *Assalam-aleikum wa rahmatullah!*
I came to Islam pretty much on my own. I was born and raised Roman Catholic, but I always had a deep fascination with the spiritualities of other cultures. My Journey started when I desired to

have a relationship with my Creator. I wanted to find my spirituality, and not the one I was born with. I spent some time in the Catholic religious order known as the Franciscans. I had many friends and I enjoyed prayer times, but it just seemed to relaxed in its faith, and there was, in my opinion, too much arrogance and hypocrisy. When I had returned back from the order into secular living again, I once again was searching for my way to reach God (Allah). One night I was watching the news on television, and of course they were continuing their one-sided half-truth reports on Muslims (always in a negative light instead of balancing it by showing the positive side as well) with images of violence and terrorism. I decided long ago that the news media has no morals whatsoever and will trash anyone for that "juicy story", and I pretty much refused to believe anything they said. I decided to research Islam for myself and draw my own conclusions.

What I found paled all the negative images that the satanic media spewed forth. I found a religion deep in love and spiritual truth, and constant God-mindfulness. What may be fanaticism to one person may be devotion to another. I picked up a small paperback Qur'an and began devouring everything I could. It opened my eyes to the wonder and mercy of ALLAH, and I found the fascination growing every day...it was all I could think about. No other religion including Catholicism impacted me in such a powerful way...I actually found myself in God-awareness 24 hours a day 7 days a week...each time I went to my five daily prayers, I went with anticipation...finally! What I have been searching for all of my life.

I finally got enough courage to go to a mosque and profess the *Shahadah* before my Muslim brothers and sisters. I now am a practicing Muslim and I thank ALLAH for leading me to this place: *Ashhahdu anna la ilaha ilallah wa Muhammadur rasul ALLAH!* This means: "I believe in the oneness and totalness of ALLAH and that Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is the Messenger of ALLAH." I now also accept Jesus as no longer equal with ALLAH, but sent as Muhammad was sent ...to bring all of mankind to

submission to the will of ALLAH! May all of mankind find the light and truth of ALLAH.

3. Mr. Ibrahim Karlsson

I was born in an ordinary, non-religious Swedish home, but with a very loving relationship to each other. I had lived my life 25 years without really thinking about the existence of God or anything spiritual what-so-ever; I was the role model of the materialistic man. Or was I? I recall a short story I wrote in 7th grade, something about my future life, where I portray myself as a successful games programmer (I hadn't yet even touched a computer) and living with a Muslim wife!! OK, at that time Muslim to me meant dressing in long clothes and wearing a scarf, but I have no idea where those thoughts came from. Later, in high school, I remember spending much time in the school-library (being a bookworm) and at one time I picked up a translated Qur'an and read some passages from it. I don't remember exactly what I read, but I do remember finding that what it said made sense and was logical to me.

Still, I was not at all religious, I couldn't fit God in my universe, and I had no need of any god. I mean, we have Newton to explain how the universe works, right? Time passed, I graduated and started working. Earned some money and moved to my own apartment, and found a wonderful tool in the PC. I became a passionate amateur photographer, and enrolled in activities around that. At one time I was documenting a marketplace, taking snapshots from a distance with my telescope when an angry looking immigrant came over and explained that he would make sure I wasn't going to take any more pictures of his mum and sisters. Strange people those Muslims...

More things related to Islam happened that I can't explain why I did what I did. I can't recall the reason I called the "Islamic information organisation" in Sweden, ordering a subscription to their newsletter, buying Yosuf Ali's Qur'an and a very good book on Islam called Islam - our faith. I just did! I read almost all of the Qur'an,

and found it to be both beautiful and logical, but still, God had no place in my heart. One year later, whilst out on a patch of land called "pretty island" (it really is) taking autumn-color pictures, I was overwhelmed by a fantastic feeling. I felt as if I were a tiny piece of something greater, a tooth on a gear in God's great gearbox called the universe. It was wonderful! I had never ever felt like this before, totally relaxed, yet bursting with energy, and above all, total awareness of god wherever I turned my eyes.

I don't know how long I stayed in this ecstatic state, but eventually it ended and I drove home, seemingly unaffected, but what I had experienced left unreasonable marks in my mind. At this time Microsoft brought Windows-95 to the market with the biggest marketing blitz known to the computer industry. Part of the package was the on-line service The Microsoft Network. And keen to know what is was I got myself an account on the MSN. I soon found that the Islam BBS were the most interesting part of the MSN, and that's where I found Shahida. Shahida is a American woman, who like me has converted to Islam. Our chemistry worked right away, and she became the best pen-friend I have ever had. Our e-mail correspondence will go down in history: the fact that my mailbox grew to something like 3 megabytes over the first 6 months tells its own tale. She and I discussed a lot about Islam and faith in god in general, and what she wrote made sense to me. Shahida had an angels patience with my slow thinking and my silly questions, but she never gave up the hope in me. Just listen to your heart and you'll find the truth she said.

And I found the truth in myself sooner than I'd expected. On the way home from work, in the bus with most of the people around me asleep, and myself adoring the sunset, painting the beautifully dispersed clouds with pink and orange colours, all the parts came together, how God can rule our life, yet we're not robots. How I could depend on physics and chemistry and still believe and see God’s work. It was wonderful, a few minutes of total understanding and peace. I so long for a moment like this to happen again! And it

did, one morning I woke up, clear as a bell, and the first thought that ran through my brain was how grateful to God I were that he made me wake up to another day full of opportunities. It was so natural, like I had been doing every day of my life! After these experiences I couldn't no longer deny God's existence. But after 25 years of denying God it was no easy task to admit his existence and accept faith. But good things kept happening to me, I spent some time in the US, and at this time I started praying, testing and feeling, learning to focus on God and to listen to what my heart said. It all ended in a nice weekend in New York, of which I had worried a lot, but it turned out to be a success, most of all, I finally got to meet Shahida!

At this point there was no return, I just didn't know it yet. But God kept leading me, I read some more, and finally got the courage to call the nearest Mosque and ask for a meeting with some Muslims. With trembling legs I drove to the mosque, which I had passed many times before, but never dared to stop and visit. I met the nicest people there, and I was given some more reading material, and made plans to come and visit the brothers in their home. What they said, and the answers they gave all made sense. Islam became a major part of my life, I started praying regularly, and I went to my first *Jumma* prayer. It was wonderful, I sneaked in, and sat in the back, not understanding a word the imam was saying, but still enjoying the service. After the *khutba* we all came together forming lines, and made the two *'rakaas'*. It was yet one of the wonderful experiences I have had on my journey to Islam. The sincerity of 200 men fully devoted to just one thing, to praise God, felt great!

Slowly my mind started to agree with my heart, I started to picture myself as a Muslim, but could I really convert to Islam? I had left the Swedish state-church earlier, just in case, but to pray 5 times a day? to stop eating pork? Could I really do that? And what about my family and friends? I recalled what Br. Omar told me, how his family tried to get him admitted to an asylum when he converted. Could I really do this?

By this time the Internet wave had swept my country, and I too had hooked up with the Infobahn. And "out there" were tons of information about Islam. I think I collected just about every web page with the word Islam anywhere in the text, and learned a lot. But what really made a change was a text I found in Great Britain, a story of a newly converted woman with feelings exactly like mine. 12 hours is the name of the text. When I had read that story, and wept the tears out of my eyes I realized that there were no turning back anymore, I couldn't resist Islam any longer.

Summer vacation started, and I had made my mind up. I had to become a Muslim! But after all, the start of the summer had been very cold, and if my first week without work was different, I wouldn't lose a day of sunshine by not being on the beach. On the TV the weatherman painted a big sun right on top of my part of the country. OK then, some other day... The next morning; a steel grey sky, with ice-cold gusts of wind outside my bedroom window. It was like God had decided my time was up, I could wait no longer. I had the required bath, and dressed in clean clothes, jumped in my car and drove the 1 hour drive to the mosque.

In the Mosque I approached the brothers with my wish, and after *dhuhr* prayer the Imam and some brothers witnessed me say the *Shahada*. *Alhamdulillah*! And to my great relief all my family and friends have taken my conversion very well, they have all accepted it, I won't say they were thrilled, but absolutely no hard feelings. They can't understand all the things I do. Like praying 5 times a day on specific times, or not eating pork meat. They think this is strange foreign customs that will die out with time, but I'll prove them wrong. *InshaAllah*!

4. Mr. Kusmari Rendrabwana

Childhood

I was born and brought up into a devoted catholic family. My father comes from a family whose members mostly turned out to

become priests and priestesses, while my mother still has a certain aristocratic blood in her family. My parents were blessed with five children, of which I am the only male and the youngest one. I never had anyone of them to play with since I was a child because of the quite significant difference in age; they were always occupied with their school tasks whenever I needed someone to play with. As it turned out to be, I got used to spending my time with the maidservant and when I was bored, I simply went out to play. For that reason I was used to make friends with people outside of my family, people in my neighborhood who were mostly Muslims.

In my family, everything that has a "Muslim taste" in it was usually considered inappropriate. So every Thursday when the time was for the recitation of the Qur'an (we only had TVRI, the government's station back then) the TV set was immediately turned off, that's how my family was like. When I got to school age, naturally my parents chose a catholic institution, as with all my sisters. Even so, I always found it easier to be friends mostly with people who were Muslim.

Adolescence

Perhaps it was because of my negative childhood image, that when I grew up to be a teen-ager my family always thought of me as being this troublesome kid. In other words, to them I was always the one to blame for everything; anything good that I did was practically nothing to them. Hence, I always tried to look up for answers of my problems through sources outside of my family. My academic records were also nothing special except for English language.

And so I started to contemplate with questions that I had in my high school year, I asked and kept asking, I read many books and literature, trying to explore everything about my faith then. But as it goes, the more I gained something, the more I felt that, "This isn't it, this is not what I want." What's worse is that the more I involved myself with religious activities, the more I went further from what I

expected, which put me down more and more. What I always found in there was nothing but negative views on somebody else's faith. Whenever I tried to give in another view, they put me down saying that I'm taking sides, I'm giving too much of a value judgement, so on and so forth. Eventually I became more distanced from them, but interestingly (and this is what had always happened) I felt myself drawn closer and closer with my Muslim friends, they seemed to accept me without any sort of tendency to judge. They knew I didn't share their faith but most of them didn't seem to mind or be disturbed by it whatsoever.

Adulthood

My adulthood started when I entered college. I enrolled in a private college whose students were predominantly Muslims. Even so, I still tried to involve myself in religious activities with students of the same faith. In that community, the old conflicting trauma appeared afresh, even worse. Eventually I lost my interest in it. As a college student, I felt more comfortable in my soul searching process. Naturally, I had more access to many references, times and places of interest, because I never felt home with my relatives, even with my sisters. And so I went on with my life as usual, until this deep spiritual experience happened. This is the story:

One morning, I don't remember the date, but it was in 1993. I was abruptly awoke from sleep and just quickly sat down. Then unconsciously went up and washed my face, hands and feet, then got back sitting with my legs crossed. Exactly then the call to *fajr* prayer started ..but very differently. I listened to it with an indescribable feeling and emotion, it was touching me so deeply, in short. I myself never could explain what really happened that morning, but so it did. Ever since then I looked for answers and learned with a practicing Muslim friend, read books, started everything from scratch. The first obstacle for me naturally came from my family, especially my mother. I became uncertain again, this is the most difficult choice in my entire life. And so months I spent trying to think over my

intention to become a Muslim. I felt that I had to make a choice. And of course I chose to become a Muslim eventually.

In early 1994 I declared my *shahadah* after finishing the *maghrib* (evening) prayer in *jama'ah* (congregation). It was really emotional, friends from my faculty in college even made me work out a written statement with them as witnesses, how touchy it was. In short, I've lived my life as a new person ever since then. After finishing my school, I started working. Even though my relationship with my family is falling apart, I try to pull everything together and be strong as to endure the hardships.

My new life was again put to a test when I was going to marry. Because I'm considered an apostate in my family's view, I had to do everything by myself, the proposal, etc., everything. No wedding reception or any of that sort, just the obligatory ones. And then when my mother died, unfortunately I didn't get to see her for the last time. Her wish, which of course I cannot comply to, was for me to return to my old faith.

Wassalaamu 'alaikum wrahmatullahi wabarakatuhu,

Rendra.

5. Mr. Malik Hassan

Oct. 23rd, 1996. *Assalamalaikum* brothers and sisters and non-Muslims.

First off all, I would like to start by saying that this true story is not for my own fame or admiration but for the sake of my Lord and your Lord Allah. All praises due to Allah, the Lord of the worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful Owner of the day of judgement. I would like to repeat to you something I heard: the journey of a thousand miles has to start with the first step and this is the first part of my journey.

My name is Malik Mohammed Hassan and I have recently converted to Islam. When I was in junior high school I was first introduced to Islam by reading the book Roots by Alex Haley. It

taught me a little bit about the strong will that most Muslims possess, myself included. It also introduced me to Allah. I had never heard of Allah in his real form until I read that book and I was very curious. I then started reading about The Nation Of Islam (specifically Malcolm X) and it fascinated me how devoted he was to Allah, especially after he left the self serving Nation Of Islam. Reading about Malcolm made me think about a God who (for a change) did not have any physical form or limitations and, being a totally blind person, it made me relate to these people: the people who Malcolm and Haley referred to as Muslims. I continued reading what I could about Islam which wasn't as much as it should have been. My reading material was very limited because like I said above: I am a totally blind person and the material available about Islam in Braille or on tape was not only very little, but also very general. I believe the reason was that the material that I had access to wasn't written by Muslims and it kind of painted a dark picture of Islam. I think most of the literature written by Christians or non-Muslims about Islam tends to do that most of the time. And I didn't know that their were even Muslims in Halifax so I obviously didn't know any. I didn't even know about the local Islamic association until I was already a Muslim.

So, I read what I could until my first year out of high school around the month of May, 1996, when I received a phone call asking me if I wanted to participate in a camp for blind and visually impaired people known throughout Canada as Score. I agreed and sent them a resume and praise be to Allah I was excepted for work. At first I really didn't want to go but something kept telling me it would be a good idea if I went. So, on June 30th 1996 I boarded a plane from Nova Scotia to Toronto and took my last trip as a non-Muslim; I just didn't know it yet.

I got to Toronto and everything at first was pretty normal... It was on the second day that I was there when the journey of a thousand miles first started. I arrived on a Sunday and on the next day I met the person who Allah would use with His divine power to

help guide me to the beautiful Religion of Islam. I met a sister named Rizvana and if she reads this I hope she doesn't get mad at me for using her name. When I met her, I immediately wanted to talk to her because I liked her name. I asked her of what origin her name was and she told me that it was Arabic; so I asked her if she was Muslim and she replied with the answer of yes. I immediately started telling her what I already knew about Islam which lasted about ten seconds. I started asking her questions and also asking her to talk to me about Islam.

One particular incident that comes to my mind is when all of the workers at the camp went to a baseball game and the sister and I started talking about Islam and missed pretty much the whole game. Well, anyway, we talked for about three, maybe four days on and off about Islam and on July the fifth if my memory doesn't fail me I became a Muslim. My life has been totally different ever since. I look at things very differently than I used to and I finally feel like I belong to a family. All Muslims are brothers and sisters in Islam so I could say that I have approximately 1.2 billion brothers and sisters all of whom I'm proud to be related to. I finally know what it feels like to be humble and to worship a God that I don't have to see.

For any non-Muslim reading this just look at it this way. It's good to learn, but you never know when you will be tested and if you're not in the class at the time of the final exam no matter how much you know you'll never get any credit. So like I said it's good to learn but if you want to get credit sign up for the class. In other words, declare *Shehada* (testimony to faith) and let Allah teach you everything you need to know. Believe me the reward is worth it. You could say the reward is literally heaven.

If any good comes out of this story all the credit is due to Allah; only the mistakes are my own. I would like to mention a part of a hadith that has had a great effect on me and that is: "Worship Allah as if you see him and if you don't see him, know that he sees you." - Sahih Muslim, Volume 1, Number 1

6. Mr. Michael Yip

June 23, 1996. I was introduced to Islam in 1995 by an Egyptian classmate who arrived in New Zealand the previous year, and who was placed into my Chemistry class. I had no religion before this, though I guess I was a non-practicing Christian, since I attended Sunday school when I was young, (but mainly to learn Chinese, my native tongue, rather than religion). In fact I was uninterested in much that was taught to me, however I never at any stage discounted the notion of a higher being (i.e. Allah, or God). Because of my background in religion, I did not know much about religions other than Christianity and Buddhism. My parents are Buddhists, but my knowledge of it was so weak that I did not even know the proper name for their religion until a few years ago. So I was naive when I met my classmate, Muhammad.

During the first few weeks, another classmate of mine kept teasing Muhammad about his religion, asking leading questions and the like. I thus became interested in some of the things that this other classmate, James, was suggesting. So I got talking with Muhammad about this religion called Islam, and we became acquainted quickly.

I requested to see a Quran but did not find the time to read it, during a busy school year. So when the workload became a bit lighter, I went to see my friend's father, who is our local Imam. He spoke to me at length about Islam, and planted a seed which in a few months time, with the blessing of Allah, blossomed into strong Muslim, *alhumdulillah*. I took *shahada* in November 1995. I am often asked why I came to Islam. The question seems logical, and simple, but in fact, I still find it the most difficult question to answer, even though I have been asked it so many times. You see, I saw many things in Islam that I liked. Included in this were the strong brotherhood and sisterhood in Islam, the way fellow Muslims looked after each other, and the logic in Islam. The logic in women wearing *Hijab* to deter from that which is *haram*, the logic in the forbidding of alcohol, which harms more than it ever will heal, and the logic in

many other areas of our lives. I have been told that many people who revert to Islam find they fit right in with the religion. Indeed this was the case with me. Coming from a *kafir* country such as New Zealand (I have lived here most of my life), it is rare for a person to be good religiously like myself, *alhumdulillah*, *mashaAllah*. You see, *alhumdulillah*, I made intentions in my heart never to drink in my life, and never have; I made intentions not to fornicate, even though everyone around me in school was either fornicating or planning to. So you see, *alhumdulillah*, Allah blessed me from the beginning, and I felt Islam was the next obvious step for me to take in my life.

I decided in November of 1995, with the encouragement with some brothers and sisters on the Internet, to take *shahada* as a first step in Islam, and then take further steps to learn more about Islam, after all we are all in a constant state of learning about Islam. *Alhumdulillah* since then I have progressed slowly but surely, learning some *surats* from Quran during a very busy school year. Allah blessed me with some amazing results last year, *alhumdulillah*, and now I want to thank my Allah by increasing the time I spend learning Quran and about Islam this year, *inshaAllah*, while I pursue entry into a Medical degree. May Allah give me the strength *inshaAllah* to enter Medical school next year. May Allah help us all to learn more about Islam, and let us all undertake to live our lives in the correct way, and follow the one true and surely straight path, that of Islam. Ameen.

7. Mr. Nuh Keller

What follows is a personal account of a scholar I have been writing to for over a year and had the blessing of meeting when I invited him to do a lecture tour around England. He is quite unique in that he seems to be one of the few reverts/converts to have achieved Islamic scholarship in the fullest sense of the word in traditional and orthodox Islam, having studied Shafi'i and Hanafi Jurisprudence (fiqh) and tenents of faith (`aqidah). I hope it will serve

as an inspiration to those who have moved closer to Islam but have not yet taken the *Shahadah*, and as a reassurance to those that have taken the *Shahadah* but are trying to find their feet in the beautiful ocean of Islam, and also as a reminder and confirmation to those of us who were blessed with being born into Muslim families, Amin.

Mas`ud Ahmed Khan

Born in 1954 in the farm country of the northwestern United States, I was raised in a religious family as a Roman Catholic. The Church provided a spiritual world that was unquestionable in my childhood, if anything more real than the physical world around me, but as I grew older, and especially after I entered a Catholic university and read more, my relation to the religion became increasingly called into question, in belief and practice. One reason was the frequent changes in Catholic liturgy and ritual that occurred in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of 1963, suggesting to laymen that the Church had no firm standards. To one another, the clergy spoke about flexibility and liturgical relevance, but to ordinary Catholics they seemed to be groping in the dark. God does not change, nor the needs of the human soul, and there was no new revelation from heaven. Yet we rang in the changes, week after week, year after year; adding, subtracting, changing the language from Latin to English, finally bringing in guitars and folk music. Priests explained and explained as laymen shook their heads. The search for relevance left large numbers convinced that there had not been much in the first place.

A second reason was a number of doctrinal difficulties, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, which no one in the history of the world, neither priest nor layman, had been able to explain in a convincing way, and which resolved itself, to the common mind at least, in a sort of godhead-by-committee, shared between God the Father, who ruled the world from heaven; His son Jesus Christ, who saved humanity on earth; and the Holy Ghost, who was pictured as a white dove and appeared to have a considerably minor role. I remember

wanting to make special friends with just one of them so he could handle my business with the others, and to this end, would sometimes pray earnestly to this one and sometimes to that; but the other two were always stubbornly there. I finally decided that God the Father must be in charge of the other two, and this put the most formidable obstacle in the way of my Catholicism, the divinity of Christ. Moreover, reflection made it plain that the nature of man contradicted the nature of God in every particular, the limitary and finite on the one hand, the absolute and infinite on the other. That Jesus was God was something I cannot remember having ever really believed, in childhood or later.

Another point of incredulity was the trading of the Church in stocks and bonds in the hereafter it called indulgences. Do such and such and so-and-so many years will be remitted from your sentence in purgatory that had seemed so false to Martin Luther at the outset of the Reformation. I also remember a desire for a sacred scripture, something on the order of a book that could furnish guidance. A Bible was given to me one Christmas, a handsome edition, but on attempting to read it, I found it so rambling and devoid of a coherent thread that it was difficult to think of a way to base one's life upon it. Only later did I learn how Christians solve the difficulty in practice, Protestants by creating sectarian theologies, each emphasizing the texts of their sect and downplaying the rest; Catholics by downplaying it all, except the snippets mentioned in their liturgy. Something seemed lacking in a sacred book that could not be read as an integral whole.

Moreover, when I went to the university, I found that the authenticity of the book, especially the New Testament, had come into considerable doubt as a result of modern hermeneutical studies by Christians themselves. In a course on contemporary theology, I read the Norman Perrin translation of The Problem of the Historical Jesus by Joachim Jeremias, one of the principal New Testament scholars of this century. A textual critic who was a master of the original languages and had spent long years with the texts, he had finally agreed with the German theologian Rudolph Bultmann that

without a doubt it is true to say that the dream of ever writing a biography of Jesus is over, meaning that the life of Christ as he actually lived it could not be reconstructed from the New Testament with any degree of confidence. If this were accepted from a friend of Christianity and one of its foremost textual experts, I reasoned, what was left for its enemies to say? And what then remained of the Bible except to acknowledge that it was a record of truths mixed with fictions, conjectures projected onto Christ by later followers, themselves at odds with each other as to who the master had been and what he had taught. And if theologians like Jeremias could reassure themselves that somewhere under the layers of later accretions to the New Testament there was something called the historical Jesus and his message, how could the ordinary person hope to find it, or know it, should it be found?

I studied philosophy at the university and it taught me to ask two things of whoever claimed to have the truth: **What do you mean, and how do you know?** When I asked these questions of my own religious tradition, I found no answers, and realized that Christianity had slipped from my hands. I then embarked on a search that is perhaps not unfamiliar to many young people in the West, a quest for meaning in a meaningless world. I began where I had lost my previous belief, with the philosophers, yet wanting to believe, seeking not philosophy, but rather a philosophy.

I read the essays of the great pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer, which taught about the phenomenon of the ages of life, and that money, fame, physical strength, and intelligence all passed from one with the passage of years, but only moral excellence remained. I took this lesson to heart and remembered it in after years. His essays also drew attention to the fact that a person won't to repudiate in later years what he fervently espouses in the heat of youth. With a prescient wish to find the Divine, I decided to imbue myself with the most cogent arguments of atheism that I could find, that perhaps I might find a way out of them later. So I read the Walter Kaufmann translations of the works of the immoralist Friedrich Nietzsche. The

many-faceted genius dissected the moral judgments and beliefs of mankind with brilliant philological and psychological arguments that ended in accusing human language itself, and the language of nineteenth-century science in particular, of being so inherently determined and mediated by concepts inherited from the language of morality that in their present form they could never hope to uncover reality. Aside from their immunological value against total skepticism, Nietzsches works explained why the West was post-Christian, and accurately predicted the unprecedented savagery of the twentieth century, debunking the myth that science could function as a moral replacement for the now dead religion.

At a personal level, his tirades against Christianity, particularly in The Genealogy of Morals, gave me the benefit of distilling the beliefs of the monotheistic tradition into a small number of analyzable forms. He separated unessential concepts (such as the bizarre spectacle of an omnipotent deity suicide on the cross) from essential ones, which I now, though without believing in them, apprehended to be but three alone: that God existed; that He created man in the world and defined the conduct expected of him in it; and that He would judge man accordingly in the hereafter and send him to eternal reward or punishment. It was during this time that I read an early translation of the Koran which I grudgingly admired, between agnostic reservations, for the purity with which it presented these fundamental concepts. Even if false, I thought, there could not be a more essential expression of religion. As a literary work, the translation, perhaps it was Sales, was uninspired and openly hostile to its subject matter, whereas I knew the Arabic original was widely acknowledged for its beauty and eloquence among the religious books of mankind. I felt a desire to learn Arabic to read the original.

On a vacation home from school, I was walking upon a dirt road between some fields of wheat, and it happened that the sun went down. By some inspiration, I realized that it was a time of worship, a time to bow and pray to the one God. But it was not something one could rely on oneself to provide the details of, but rather a passing

fancy, or perhaps the beginning of an awareness that atheism was an inauthentic way of being.

I carried something of this disquiet with me when I transferred to the University of Chicago, where I studied the epistemology of ethical theory how moral judgments were reached reading and searching among the books of the philosophers for something to shed light on the question of meaninglessness, which was both a personal concern and one of the central philosophical problems of our age. According to some, scientific observation could only yield description statements of the form X is Y, for example, The object is red, Its weight is two kilos, Its height is ten centimeters, and so on, in each of which the functional was a scientifically verifiable is, whereas in moral judgments the functional element was an ought, a description statement which no amount of scientific observation could measure or verify. It appeared that ought was logically meaningless, and with it all morality whatsoever, a position that reminded me of those described by Lucian in his advice that whoever sees a moral philosopher coming down the road should flee from him as from a mad dog. For such a person, expediency ruled, and nothing checked his behavior but convention.

As Chicago was a more expensive school, and I had to raise tuition money, I found summer work on the West Coast with a seining boat fishing in Alaska. The sea proved a school in its own right, one I was to return to for a space of eight seasons, for the money. I met many people on boats, and saw something of the power and greatness of the wind, water, storms, and rain; and the smallness of man. These things lay before us like an immense book, but my fellow fishermen and I could only discern the letters of it that were within our context: to catch as many fish as possible within the specified time to sell to the tenders. Few knew how to read the book as a whole. Sometimes, in a blow, the waves rose like great hills, and the captain would hold the wheel with white knuckles, our bow one minute plunging gigantically down into a valley of green water, the next moment reaching the bottom of the trough and soaring

upwards towards the sky before topping the next crest and starting down again.

Early in my career as a deck hand, I had read the Hazel Barnes translation of Jean Paul Sartres "Being and Nothingness", in which he argued that phenomena only arose for consciousness in the existential context of human projects, a theme that recalled Marxs 1844 manuscripts, where nature was produced by man, meaning, for example, that when the mystic sees a stand of trees, his consciousness hypostatizes an entirely different phenomenal object than a poet does, for example, or a capitalist. To the mystic, it is a manifestation; to the poet, a forest; to the capitalist, lumber. According to such a perspective, a mountain only appears as tall in the context of the project of climbing it, and so on, according to the instrumental relations involved in various human interests. But the great natural events of the sea surrounding us seemed to defy, with their stubborn, irreducible facticity, our uncomprehending attempts to come to terms with them. Suddenly, we were just there, shaken by the forces around us without making sense of them, wondering if we would make it through. Some, it was true, would ask God help at such moments, but when we returned safely to shore, we behaved like men who knew little of Him, as if those moments had been a lapse into insanity, embarrassing to think of at happier times. It was one of the lessons of the sea that in fact, such events not only existed but perhaps even preponderated in our life. Man was small and weak, the forces around him were large, and he did not control them.

Sometimes a boat would sink and men would die. I remember a fisherman from another boat who was working near us one opening, doing the same job as I did, piling web. He smiled across the water as he pulled the net from the hydraulic block overhead, stacking it neatly on the stern to ready it for the next set. Some weeks later, his boat overturned while fishing in a storm, and he got caught in the web and drowned. I saw him only once again, in a dream, beckoning to me from the stern of his boat. The tremendousness of the scenes we lived in, the storms, the towering sheer cliffs rising vertically out

of the water for hundreds of feet, the cold and rain and fatigue, the occasional injuries and deaths of workers these made little impression on most of us. Fishermen were, after all, supposed to be tough. On one boat, the family that worked it was said to lose an occasional crew member while running at sea at the end of the season, invariably the sole non-family member who worked with them, his loss saving them the wages they would have otherwise had to pay him.

The captain of another was a twenty-seven-year-old who delivered millions of dollars worth of crab each year in the Bering Sea. When I first heard of him, we were in Kodiak, his boat at the city dock they had tied up to after a lengthy run some days before. The captain was presently indisposed in his bunk in the stateroom, where he had been vomiting up blood from having eaten a glass uptown the previous night to prove how tough he was. He was in somewhat better condition when I later saw him in the Bering Sea at the end of a long winter king crab season. He worked in his wheelhouse up top, surrounded by radios that could pull in a signal from just about anywhere, computers, Loran, sonar, depth-finders, radar. His panels of lights and switches were set below the 180-degree sweep of shatterproof windows that overlooked the sea and the men on deck below, to whom he communicated by loudspeaker. They often worked round the clock, pulling their gear up from the icy water under watchful batteries of enormous electric lights attached to the masts that turned the perpetual night of the winter months into day. The captain had a reputation as a screamer, and had once locked his crew out on deck in the rain for eleven hours because one of them had gone inside to have a cup of coffee without permission. Few crewmen lasted longer than a season with him, though they made nearly twice the yearly income of, say, a lawyer or an advertising executive, and in only six months. Fortunes were made in the Bering Sea in those years, before over fishing wiped out the crab.

At present, he was at anchor, and was amiable enough when we tied up to him and he came aboard to sit and talk with our own captain. They spoke at length, at times gazing thoughtfully out at the sea through the door or windows, at times looking at each other sharply when something animated them, as the topic of what his competitors thought of him. "They wonder why I have a few bucks", he said. "Well I slept in my own home one night last year." He later had his crew throw off the lines and pick the anchor, his eyes flickering warily over the water from the windows of the house as he pulled away with a blast of smoke from the stack. His watchfulness, his walrus-like physique, his endless voyages after game and markets, reminded me of other predatory hunter-animals of the sea. Such people, good at making money but heedless of any ultimate end or purpose, made an impression on me, and I increasingly began to wonder if men didn't need principles to guide them and tell them why they were there. Without such principles, nothing seemed to distinguish us above our prey except being more thorough, and technologically capable of preying longer, on a vaster scale, and with greater devastation than the animals we hunted.

These considerations were in my mind the second year I studied at Chicago, where I became aware through studies of philosophical moral systems that philosophy had not been successful in the past at significantly influencing peoples morals and preventing injustice, and I came to realize that there was little hope for it to do so in the future. I found that comparing human cultural systems and societies in their historical succession and multiplicity had led many intellectuals to moral relativism, since no moral value could be discovered which on its own merits was transculturally valid, a reflection leading to nihilism, the perspective that sees human civilizations as plants that grow out of the earth, springing from their various seeds and soils, thriving for a time, and then dying away. Some heralded this as intellectual liberation, among them Emile Durkheim in his "Elementary Forms of the Religious Life", or Sigmund Freud in his "Totem and Taboo", which discussed mankind as if it were a patient and diagnosed its religious traditions as a form

of a collective neurosis that we could now hope to cure, by applying to them a thorough scientific atheism, a sort of salvation through pure science.

On this subject, I bought the Jeremy Shapiro translation of "Knowledge and Human Interests" by Jurgen Habermas, who argued that there was no such thing as pure science that could be depended upon to forge boldly ahead in a steady improvement of itself and the world. He called such a misunderstanding scientism, not science. Science in the real world, he said, was not free of values, still less of interests. The kinds of research that obtain funding, for example, were a function of what their society deemed meaningful, expedient, profitable, or important. Habermas had been of a generation of German academics who, during the thirties and forties, knew what was happening in their country, but insisted they were simply engaged in intellectual production, that they were living in the realm of scholarship, and need not concern themselves with whatever the state might choose to do with their research. The horrible question mark that was attached to German intellectuals when the Nazi atrocities became public after the war made Habermas think deeply about the ideology of pure science. If anything was obvious, it was that the nineteenth-century optimism of thinkers like Freud and Durkheim was no longer tenable.

I began to reassess the intellectual life around me. Like Schopenhauer, I felt that higher education must produce higher human beings. But at the university, I found lab people talking to each other about forging research data to secure funding for the coming year; luminaries who wouldn't permit tape recorders at their lectures for fear that competitors in the same field would go one step further with their research and beat them to publication; professors envying with each other in the length of their courses syllabuses. The moral qualities I was accustomed to associate with ordinary, unregenerate humanity seemed as frequently met with in sophisticated academics as they had been in fishermen. If one could laugh at fishermen who, after getting a boatload of fish in a big catch,

would cruise back and forth in front of the others to let them see how laden down in the water they were, ostensibly looking for more fish; what could one say about the Ph.D.s who behaved the same way about their books and articles? I felt that their knowledge had not developed their persons, that the secret of higher man did not lie in their sophistication.

I wondered if I hadn't gone down the road of philosophy as far as one could go. While it had debunked my Christianity and provided some genuine insights, it had not yet answered the big questions. Moreover, I felt that this was somehow connected I didn't know whether as cause or effect to the fact that our intellectual tradition no longer seemed to seriously comprehend itself. What were any of us, whether philosophers, fishermen, garbage men, or kings, except bit players in a drama we did not understand, diligently playing out our roles until our replacements were sent, and we gave our last performance? But could one legitimately hope for more than this? I read "Kojves Introduction to the Reading of Hegel", in which he explained that for Hegel, philosophy did not culminate in the system, but rather in the Wise Man, someone able to answer any possible question on the ethical implications of human actions. This made me consider our own plight in the twentieth century, which could no longer answer a single ethical question.

It was thus as if this centuries unparalleled mastery of concrete things had somehow ended by making us things. I contrasted this with Hegels concept of the concrete in his "Phenomenology of Mind". An example of the abstract, in his terms, was the limitary physical reality of the book now held in your hands, while the concrete was its interconnection with the larger realities it presupposed, the modes of production that determined the kind of ink and paper in it, the aesthetic standards that dictated its color and design, the systems of marketing and distribution that had carried it to the reader, the historical circumstances that had brought about the readers literacy and taste; the cultural events that had mediated its style and usage; in short, the bigger picture in which it was articulated

and had its being. For Hegel, the movement of philosophical investigation always led from the abstract to the concrete, to the more real. He was therefore able to say that philosophy necessarily led to theology, whose object was the ultimately real, the Deity. This seemed to me to point up an irreducible lack in our century. I began to wonder if, by materializing our culture and our past, we had not somehow abstracted ourselves from our wider humanity, from our true nature in relation to a higher reality.

At this juncture, I read a number of works on Islam, among them the books of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who believed that many of the problems of western man, especially those of the environment, were from his having left the divine wisdom of revealed religion, which taught him his true place as a creature of God in the natural world and to understand and respect it. Without it, he burned up and consumed nature with ever more effective technological styles of commercial exploitation that ruined his world from without while leaving him increasingly empty within, because he did not know why he existed or to what end he should act. I reflected that this might be true as far as it went, but it begged the question as to the truth of revealed religion. Everything on the face of the earth, all moral and religious systems, were on the same plane, unless one could gain certainty that one of them was from a higher source, the sole guarantee of the objectivity, the whole force, of moral law.

Otherwise, one man's opinion was as good as another's, and we remained in an undifferentiated sea of conflicting individual interests, in which no valid objection could be raised to the strong eating the weak.

I read other books on Islam, and came across some passages translated by W. Montgomery Watt from "That Which Delivers from Error" by the theologian and mystic Ghazali, who, after a mid-life crises of questioning and doubt, realized that beyond the light of prophetic revelation there is no other light on the face of the earth from which illumination may be received, the very point to which my

philosophical inquiries had led. Here was, in Hegels terms, the Wise Man, in the person of a divinely inspired messenger who alone had the authority to answer questions of good and evil.

I also read A.J. Arberrys translation "The Koran Interpreted", and I recalled my early wish for a sacred book. Even in translation, the superiority of the Muslim scripture over the Bible was evident in every line, as if the reality of divine revelation, dimly heard of all my life, had now been placed before my eyes. In its exalted style, its power, its inexorable finality, its uncanny way of anticipating the arguments of the atheistic heart in advance and answering them; it was a clear exposition of God as God and man as man, the revelation of the awe-inspiring Divine Unity being the identical revelation of social and economic justice among men.

I began to learn Arabic at Chicago, and after studying the grammar for a year with a fair degree of success, decided to take a leave of absence to try to advance in the language in a year of private study in Cairo. Too, a desire for new horizons drew me, and after a third season of fishing, I went to the Middle East. In Egypt, I found something I believe brings many to Islam, namely, the mark of pure monotheism upon its followers, which struck me as more profound than anything I had previously encountered. I met many Muslims in Egypt, good and bad, but all influenced by the teachings of their Book to a greater extent than I had ever seen elsewhere. It has been some fifteen years since then, and I cannot remember them all, or even most of them, but perhaps the ones I can recall will serve to illustrate the impressions made.

One was a man on the side of the Nile near the Miqyas Gardens, where I used to walk. I came upon him praying on a piece of cardboard, facing across the water. I started to pass in front of him, but suddenly checked myself and walked around behind, not wanting to disturb him. As I watched a moment before going my way, I beheld a man absorbed in his relation to God, oblivious to my presence, much less my opinions about him or his religion. To my

mind, there was something magnificently detached about this, altogether strange for someone coming from the West, where praying in public was virtually the only thing that remained obscene.

Another was a young boy from secondary school who greeted me near Khan al-Khalili, and because I spoke some Arabic and he spoke some English and wanted to tell me about Islam, he walked with me several miles across town to Giza, explaining as much as he could. When we parted, I think he said a prayer that I might become Muslim.

Another was a Yemeni friend living in Cairo who brought me a copy of the Koran at my request to help me learn Arabic. I did not have a table beside the chair where I used to sit and read in my hotel room, and it was my custom to stack the books on the floor. When I set the Koran by the others there, he silently stooped and picked it up, out of respect for it. This impressed me because I knew he was not religious, but here was the effect of Islam upon him.

Another was a woman I met while walking beside a bicycle on an unpaved road on the opposite side of the Nile from Luxor. I was dusty, and somewhat shabbily clothed, and she was an old woman dressed in black from head to toe who walked up, and without a word or glance at me, pressed a coin into my hand so suddenly that in my surprise I dropped it. By the time I picked it up, she had hurried away. Because she thought I was poor, even if obviously non-Muslim, she gave me some money without any expectation for it except what was between her and her God. This act made me think a lot about Islam, because nothing seemed to have motivated her but that.

Many other things passed through my mind during the months I stayed in Egypt to learn Arabic. I found myself thinking that a man must have some sort of religion, and I was more impressed by the effect of Islam on the lives of Muslims, a certain nobility of purpose and largesse of soul, than I had ever been by any other religions or

even atheisms effect on its followers. The Muslims seemed to have more than we did.

Christianity had its good points to be sure, but they seemed mixed with confusions, and I found myself more and more inclined to look to Islam for their fullest and most perfect expression. The first question we had memorized from our early catechism had been Why were you created? To which the correct answer was to know, love, and serve God. When I reflected on those around me, I realized that Islam seemed to furnish the most comprehensive and understandable way to practice this on a daily basis.

As for the inglorious political fortunes of the Muslims today, I did not feel these to be a reproach against Islam, or to relegate it to an inferior position in a natural order of world ideologies, but rather saw them as a low phase in a larger cycle of history. Foreign hegemony over Muslim lands had been witnessed before in the thorough going destruction of Islamic civilization in the thirteenth century by the Mongol horde, who razed cities and built pyramids of human heads from the steppes of Central Asia to the Muslim heartlands, after which the fullness of destiny brought forth the Ottoman Empire to raise the Word of Allah and make it a vibrant political reality that endured for centuries. It was now, I reflected, merely the turn of contemporary Muslims to strive for a new historic crystallization of Islam, something one might well aspire to share in.

When a friend in Cairo one day asked me, Why don't you become a Muslim, I found that Allah had created within me a desire to belong to this religion, which so enriches its followers, from the simplest hearts to the most magisterial intellects. It is not through an act of the mind or will that anyone becomes a Muslim, but rather through the mercy of Allah, and this, in the final analysis, was what brought me to Islam in Cairo in 1977.

"Is it not time that the hearts of those who believe should be humbled to the Remembrance of God and the Truth which He has sent down, and

that they should not be as those to whom the Book was given a foretime, and the term seemed over long to them, so that their hearts have become hard, and many of them are ungodly? Know that God revives the earth after it was dead. We have indeed made clear for you the signs, that haply you will understand." [Qur'an 57:16-17]

Nuh Ha Mim Keller is the translator of "The Reliance of the Traveller" [`Umdat as-Salik] by Ahmed Ibn Naqib al-Misri

8. Mr. Rob Wicks

[In the following article, "NOI" refers to the Nation of Islam, which in spite of its name, is a group far removed from Islam. -Ed.]

I grew up Baptist, in a family of ministers, in rural Mississippi. I went to college at Morehouse College in Atlanta, so I was exposed to the NOI, but I had the good fortune to become friends with an orthodox Muslim who explained to me the difference between NOI and Islam, and the lack of knowledge most NOI have of true Islam. Later, after I left school and began working, I got an internet account, and started to study some of the religions of the world. I had never really been a particularly religious person, due to my somewhat scientific nature. I always insist on proof. I started to delve deeper into Christianity, and studied it intently on the Web. I was somewhat disdained however by some inconsistencies in the Bible. I principally was troubled by the Trinity, though. I just did not see it. The one passage I saw as being most supportive (1 John 5:7) was partially forged. When I read Mathew 19:16-17, and Jesus (pbuh) says "Why callest thou me good? It was clear to me that he was saying that he was not good, and only God was. But most of the Christians seemed to think Jesus was being tongue-in-cheek at this point. I found that I would have to be dishonest to accept this.

Then fortune smiled upon me. I hit a deer in my car. It was out of service for almost a month. During that time, I was unemployed, but had saved money, so I could live (I also have two roommates). I

still had my Internet account, and I decided to study more. After I had studied the Biblical contradictions, in addition to the inherent idolatry and unscriptural nature of the Trinity, along with other things, I rejected Christianity as a religion. Even Jesus did not seem to teach it, he taught belief in God. I went a time without any religion, thinking maybe it was all a sham. I have a friend who is in the 5% NOI, and I saw how much he hated religion, and I decided that I did not want to be like that. I believe that God kept my mind open and my heart from hardening against Him, and I studied Islam. Everything just seemed to fit: a reasoned faith which was very prayerful to keep us on the straight path, yet did not disdain acquisition of knowledge (the preachers back home loved to rail against education, as if ignorance is preferred by God). Islam seemed to be made for me. A good Muslim was the exact sort of person I aspired to be. After another month of study and prayer, I decided that if Muhammad (pbuh) was not a prophet, then there had never been prophets in the first place. The moment of decision came one night when I was reading the Qur'an and I read 21:30, and I read of God expanding his creation. Now, I almost became an astronomer at one point, and I still am interested, and these verses hit me like a sledgehammer. I became fearful of God, and wanted to worship him better.

9. Mr. Samir

My conversion to Islam has been intellectual and emotional. My parents have both been educated at the university-level. My mother is a Christian convert (she was atheist), and my father has personal beliefs. My family is rather rich. Ever since I was very young, I've been interested by political questions. I enjoyed reading history books, although I was confused a little bit between military history and politics. I called myself a communist, but today I wouldn't say I knew what it means. Over time, I learned real politics and sociology, but when the communist bloc fell, I admitted my error and was no longer a fan of the communist states. I became agnostic, and thought that all human beings are condemned to

egotism and to ignorance of some questions, like the existence of God. I learned philosophy. I wanted to avoid doing the same mistakes as in the past, and so I refused all dogmas. At this time occurred the separation of my parents, and also other personal problems. To forget all this, I spent a lot of time in laughing with (fake) friends, drinking, and then smoking cigarettes, then hash. I sometimes took hard drugs (heroin, LSD, and some other poisons).

Despite this, I passed my baccalaureate (this is an exam that ends four years of college and gives the right to continue graduate level study at the university). By chance, I had to go at the army (we do not have the choice in the country I live in). The strict rules I could not avoid there were a very good thing for me; also, I was tired enough to enjoy simple things as eating and sleeping. *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to God), my mentality changed.

Back in civil society, I spent one more dark year: I always had the temptation of my bad habits, and I felt that life was very superficial after the big efforts and the friendship of the army. I began feeling the necessity of something else in my life. Then one of my sisters, back from a journey to Syria, gave me a book. This book, written in my language, is a gift she received there. Its author, who had titled it "The Bible, Quran and Science", wanted to show that there are in the Quran some things that were simply impossible for a human being to know at the time the Quran was revealed. Conclusion: the authenticity of the Quran is proved, scientifically proved. The first thing I thought after having read the book was: "Oh! It would be super!" -- I was ready for a change in my way of life.

I bought a translation of the Quran to compare. Before having entirely read it, I had become a Muslim, *alhamdulillah*. As you can see, a psychologist wouldn't have any problem to explain what he would call my choice. For me, all things come from God and He had written this for me, He had chosen these means to make me accept Islam. *Alhamdulillah*! What no psychologist can see is what happens

in my heart when I read the Quran: faith has little to do with what one feels in front of a scientific demonstration!

10. Mr. Yahiye Adam Gadahn

My first seventeen years have been a bit different than the youth experienced by most Americans. I grew up on an extremely rural goat ranch in Western Riverside County, California, where my family raises on average 150 to 200 animals for milk, cheese, and meat. My father is a halal butcher [a butcher who slaughters in an Islamic manner -ed.] and supplies to an Islamic Food Mart a few blocks from the Islamic Center in downtown Los Angeles.

My father was raised agnostic or atheist, but he became a believer in One God when he picked up a Bible left on the beach. He once had a number of Muslim friends, but they've all moved out of California now. My mother was raised Catholic, so she leans towards Christianity (although she, like my father, disregards the Trinity). I and my siblings were/are home-schooled, and as you may know, most home-school families are Christian. In the last 8 or so years, we have been involved with some home-schooling support groups, thus acquainting me with fundamentalist Christianity.

It was an eye-opening experience. Setting aside the blind dogmatism and charismatic wackiness, it was quite a shock to me when I realized that these people, in their prayers, were actually praying TO JESUS. You see, I had always believed that Jesus (pbuh) was, at the very most, the Son of God (since that is what the Bible mistranslates "Servant of God"). As I learned that belief in the Trinity, something I find absolutely ridiculous, is considered by most Christians to be a prerequisite for salvation, I gradually realized I could not be a Christian.

In the meantime, I had become obsessed with demonic Heavy Metal music, something the rest of my family (as I now realize, rightfully so) was not happy with. My entire life was focused on

expanding my music collection. I eschewed personal cleanliness and let my room reach an unbelievable state of disarray. My relationship with my parents became strained, although only intermittently so. I am sorry even as I write this.

Earlier this year, I began to listen to the apocalyptic ramblings of Christian radio's "prophecy experts." Their paranoid espousal of various conspiracy theories, rabid support of Israel and religious Zionism, and fiery preaching about the "Islamic Threat" held for me a strange fascination. Why? Well, I suppose it was simply the need I was feeling to fill that void I had created for myself. In any case, I soon found that the beliefs these evangelists held, such as Original Sin and the Infallibility of "God's Word", were not in agreement with my theological ideas (not to mention the Bible) and I began to look for something else to hold onto.

The turning point, perhaps, was when I moved in with my grandparents here in Santa Ana, the county seat of Orange, California. My grandmother, a computer whiz, is hooked up to America Online and I have been scooting the information superhighway since January. But when I moved in, with the intent of finding a job (easier said than done), I begin to visit the religion folders on AOL and the Usenet newsgroups, where I found discussions on Islam to be the most intriguing. You see, I discovered that the beliefs and practices of this religion fit my personal theology and intellect as well as basic human logic. Islam presents God not as an anthropomorphic being but as an entity beyond human comprehension, transcendent of man, independent and undivided.

Islam has a holy book that is comprehensible to a layman, and there is no papacy or priesthood that is considered infallible in matters of interpretation: all Muslims are free to reflect and interpret the book given a sufficient education. Islam does not believe that all men are doomed to Hell unless they simply accept that God (apparently unable to forgive otherwise) magnanimously allowed Himself to be tortured on a cross to enable Him to forgive all human

beings who just believe that He allowed Himself to be tortured on a cross... Islam does not believe in a Chosen Race. And on and on...

As I began reading English translations of the Qur'an, I became more and more convinced of the truth and authenticity of Allah's teachings contained in those 114 chapters. Having been around Muslims in my formative years, I knew well that they were not the bloodthirsty, barbaric terrorists that the news media and the televangelists paint them to be. Perhaps this knowledge led me to continue my personal research further than another person would have. I can't say when I actually decided that Islam was for me. It was really a natural progression. In any case, last week [November 1995 -ed.] I went to the Islamic Society of Orange County in Garden Grove and told the brother in charge of the library I wanted to be a Muslim. He gave me some excellent reading material, and last Friday I took *Shahada* [accepted the creed of Islam -ed.] in front of a packed *masjid*. I have spent this week learning to perform *Salat* and reflecting on the greatness of Allah. It feels great to be a Muslim! *Subhaana rabbiyal 'azeem!*

11. Mr. Yusuf Islam

How I came to Islam

All I have to say is all what you know already, to confirm what you already know, the message of the Prophet (*Sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*) as given by God - the Religion of Truth. As human beings we are given a consciousness and a duty that has placed us at the top of creation. Man is created to be God's deputy on earth, and it is important to realize the obligation to rid ourselves of all illusions and to make our lives a preparation for the next life. Anybody who misses this chance is not likely to be given another, to be brought back again and again, because it says in Qur'an *Majeed* that when man is brought to account, he will say, "O Lord, send us back and give us another chance." The Lord will say, "If I send you back you will do the same."

My Early Religious Upbringing

I was brought up in the modern world of all the luxury and the high life of show business. I was born in a Christian home, but we know that every child is born in his original nature - it is only his parents that turn him to this or that religion. I was given this religion (Christianity) and thought this way. I was taught that God exists, but there was no direct contact with God, so we had to make contact with Him through Jesus - he was in fact the door to God. This was more or less accepted by me, but I did not swallow it all. I looked at some of the statues of Jesus; they were just stones with no life. And when they said that God is three, I was puzzled even more but could not argue. I more or less believed it, because I had to have respect for the faith of my parents.

Pop Star

Gradually I became alienated from this religious upbringing. I started making music. I wanted to be a big star. All those things I saw in the films and on the media took hold of me, and perhaps I thought this was my God, the goal of making money. I had an uncle who had a beautiful car. "Well," I said, "he has it made. He has a lot of money." The people around me influenced me to think that this was it; this world was their God.

I decided then that this was the life for me; to make a lot of money, have a 'great life.' Now my examples were the pop stars. I started making songs, but deep down I had a feeling for humanity, a feeling that if I became rich I would help the needy. (It says in the Qur'an, we make a promise, but when we make something, we want to hold onto it and become greedy.) So what happened was that I became very famous. I was still a teenager, my name and photo were splashed in all the media. They made me larger than life, so I wanted to live larger than life and the only way to do that was to be intoxicated (with liquor and drugs).

In Hospital

After a year of financial success and 'high' living, I became very ill, contracted TB and had to be hospitalized. It was then that I started to think: What was to happen to me? Was I just a body, and my goal in life was merely to satisfy this body? I realized now that this calamity was a blessing given to me by Allah, a chance to open my eyes - "Why am I here? Why am I in bed?" - and I started looking for some of the answers. At that time there was great interest in the Eastern mysticism. I began reading, and the first thing I began to become aware of was death, and that the soul moves on; it does not stop. I felt I was taking the road to bliss and high accomplishment. I started meditating and even became a vegetarian. I now believed in 'peace and flower power,' and this was the general trend. But what I did believe in particular was that I was not just a body. This awareness came to me at the hospital.

One day when I was walking and I was caught in the rain, I began running to the shelter and then I realized, 'Wait a minute, my body is getting wet, my body is telling me I am getting wet.' This made me think of a saying that the body is like a donkey, and it has to be trained where it has to go. Otherwise, the donkey will lead you where it wants to go.

Then I realized I had a will, a God-given gift: follow the will of God. I was fascinated by the new terminology I was learning in the Eastern religion. By now I was fed up with Christianity. I started making music again and this time I started reflecting my own thoughts. I remember the lyric of one of my songs. It goes like this: "I wish I knew, I wish I knew what makes the Heaven, what makes the Hell. Do I get to know You in my bed or some dusty cell while others reach the big hotel?" and I knew I was on the Path.

I also wrote another song, "The Way to Find God Out." I became even more famous in the world of music. I really had a difficult time because I was getting rich and famous, and at the same time, I was sincerely searching for the Truth. Then I came to a stage

where I decided that Buddhism is all right and noble, but I was not ready to leave the world. I was too attached to the world and was not prepared to become a monk and to isolate myself from society.

I tried Zen and Ching, numerology, tarot cards and astrology. I tried to look back into the Bible and could not find anything. At this time I did not know anything about Islam, and then, what I regarded as a miracle occurred. My brother had visited the mosque in Jerusalem and was greatly impressed that while on the one hand it throbbed with life (unlike the churches and synagogues which were empty), on the other hand, an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity prevailed.

The Qur'an

When he came to London he brought back a translation of the Qur'an, which he gave to me. He did not become a Muslim, but he felt something in this religion, and thought I might find something in it also. And when I received the book, a guidance that would explain everything to me - who I was; what was the purpose of life; what was the reality and what would be the reality; and where I came from - I realized that this was the true religion; religion not in the sense the West understands it, not the type for only your old age. In the West, whoever wishes to embrace a religion and make it his only way of life is deemed a fanatic. I was not a fanatic, I was at first confused between the body and the soul. Then I realized that the body and soul are not apart and you don't have to go to the mountain to be religious. We must follow the will of God. Then we can rise higher than the angels. The first thing I wanted to do now was to be a Muslim.

I realized that everything belongs to God, that slumber does not overtake Him. He created everything. At this point I began to lose the pride in me, because hereto I had thought the reason I was here was because of my own greatness. But I realized that I did not create myself, and the whole purpose of my being here was to submit to the teaching that has been perfected by the religion we know as Al-Islam.

At this point I started discovering my faith. I felt I was a Muslim. On reading the Qur'an, I now realized that all the Prophets sent by God brought the same message. Why then were the Jews and Christians different? I know now how the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and that they had changed His Word. Even the Christians misunderstand God's Word and called Jesus the son of God. Everything made so much sense. This is the beauty of the Qur'an; it asks you to reflect and reason, and not to worship the sun or moon but the One Who has created everything. The Qur'an asks man to reflect upon the sun and moon and God's creation in general. Do you realize how different the sun is from the moon? They are at varying distances from the earth, yet appear the same size to us; at times one seems to overlap the other. Even when many of the astronauts go to space, they see the insignificant size of the earth and vastness of space. They become very religious, because they have seen the Signs of Allah.

When I read the Qur'an further, it talked about prayer, kindness and charity. I was not a Muslim yet, but I felt that the only answer for me was the Qur'an, and God had sent it to me, and I kept it a secret. But the Qur'an also speaks on different levels. I began to understand it on another level, where the Qur'an says, "Those who believe do not take disbelievers for friends and the believers are brothers." Thus at this point I wished to meet my Muslim brothers.

Conversion

Then I decided to journey to Jerusalem (as my brother had done). At Jerusalem, I went to the mosque and sat down. A man asked me what I wanted. I told him I was a Muslim. He asked what was my name. I told him, "Stevens." He was confused. I then joined the prayer, though not so successfully. Back in London, I met a sister called Nafisa. I told her I wanted to embrace Islam and she directed me to the New Regent Mosque. This was in 1977, about one and a half years after I received the Qur'an. Now I realized that I must get rid of my pride, get rid of Iblis, and face one direction. So on a

Friday, after Jumma' I went to the Imam and declared my faith (the Kalima) at his hands. You have before you someone who had achieved fame and fortune. But guidance was something that eluded me, no matter how hard I tried, until I was shown the Qur'an. Now I realize I can get in direct contact with God, unlike Christianity or any other religion. As one Hindu lady told me, "You don't understand the Hindus. We believe in one God; we use these objects (idols) to merely concentrate." What she was saying was that in order to reach God, one has to create associates, that are idols for the purpose. But Islam removes all these barriers. The only thing that moves the believers from the disbelievers is the *salat*. This is the process of purification.

Finally I wish to say that everything I do is for the pleasure of Allah and pray that you gain some inspirations from my experiences. Furthermore, I would like to stress that I did not come into contact with any Muslim before I embraced Islam. I read the Qur'an first and realized that no person is perfect. Islam is perfect, and if we imitate the conduct of the Holy Prophet (*Sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*) we will be successful. May Allah give us guidance to follow the path of the *ummah* of Muhammad (*Sallallahu alaihi wa sallam*). Ameen!

Yusuf Islam
(Formerly Cat Stevens)

End.